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The Two Most Crucial People Skills

How to be assertive AND have empathy

Philip Gould

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The Two Most Crucial People Skills: How to be assertive AND have empathy
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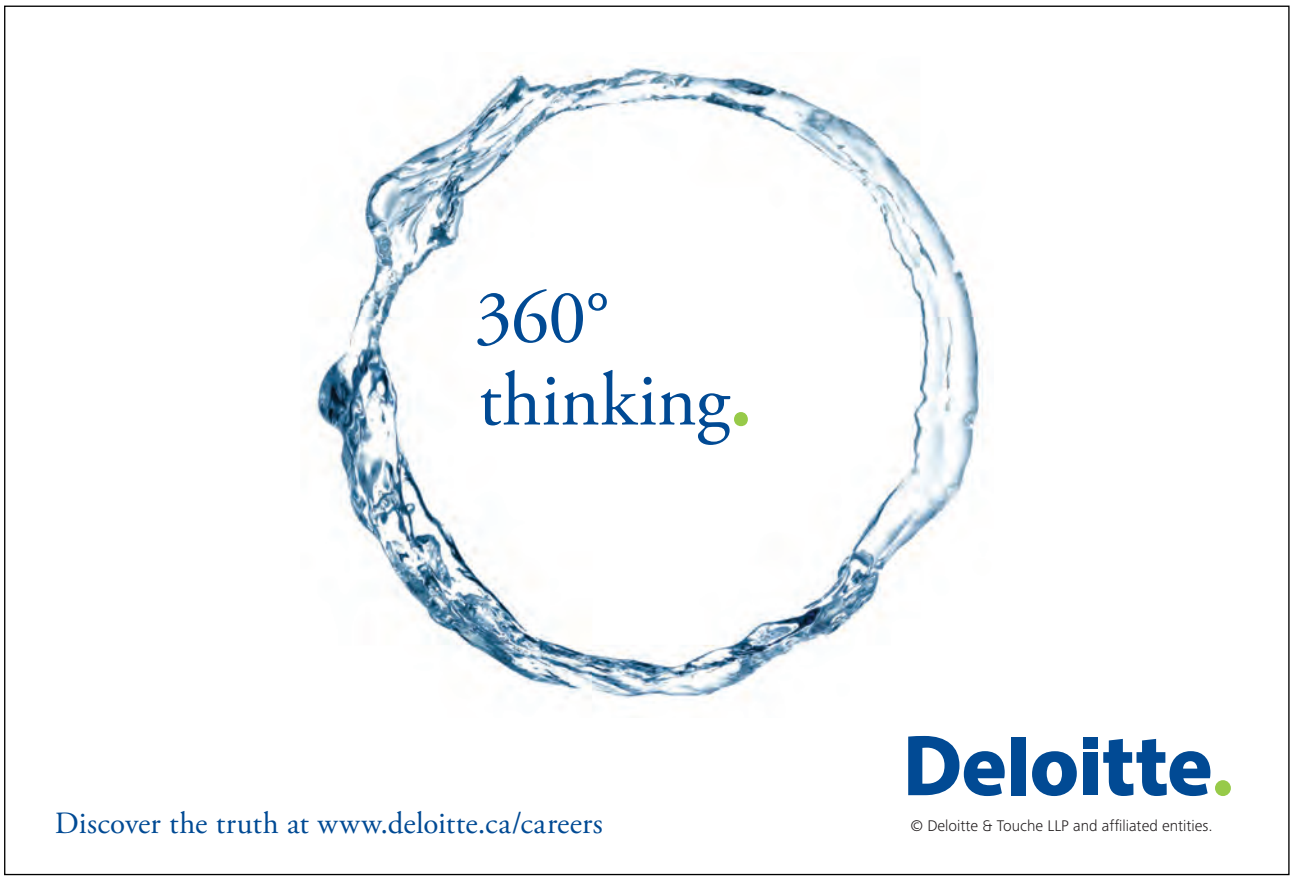
Contents

	Preface	**9**
	Part One: The two crucial skills	**12**
1	**Introduction**	**13**
1.1	Example of the two crucial skills in action	13
1.2	Why are these skills so effective?	16
2	**Empathy**	**19**
2.1	How to listen with empathy	19
2.2	The difference between empathy and sympathy	23
2.3	Common mental habits that get in the way of empathy	24
2.4	Frequently asked questions	25
3	**Coaching with empathy**	**28**
3.1	Using open questions	30
3.2	How to coach	33



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4	**Assertiveness**	**35**
4.1	How to speak assertively	35
4.2	How to make a complaint	36
4.3	The assertive ratchet	37
4.4	How to use the assertive ratchet	38
4.5	How to get people's attention in a meeting	39
4.6	Common mental habits that prevent assertiveness	39
5a	**Saying what you *want***	**42**
5.1	How to realise and say what you want	43
5b	**Saying what you *don't* want – saying '*no*'**	**44**
5.2	How to say 'no'	46
6	**Conclusion of Part One and preparation for Part Two**	**47**
6.1	A radically different approach to difficult conversations	47

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	Part Two: Difficult conversations	**49**
7	**Giving feedback, or criticism**	**50**
7.1	How to give feedback, or criticism	52
7.2	Frequently asked questions about praise and criticism	52
8	**Customer support – responding to calls for technical help**	**54**
8.1	How to handle calls for technical support	56
9	**Persuasion without argument**	**57**
9.1	How to persuade without argument	60
9.2	Frequently asked questions about persuasion	62
10	**Handling resistance in a meeting**	**64**
10.1	How to handle resistance in a meeting	65
10.2	Crucial dos and don'ts when running a persuasive meeting	67
10.3	A few other practical points	67
11	**Handling objections when selling**	**68**
11.1	How to handle objections	70

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12	**Handling complaints**	**71**
12.1	How to handle complaints	71
13	**Receiving criticism without being defensive**	**73**
13.1	How to receive criticism without being defensive	75
14	**Criticising someone's idea constructively**	**76**
14.1	How to criticise someone's idea	78
15	**Handling conflict**	**79**
15.1	How to handle conflict	80
16	**Negotiating for a win-win agreement**	**82**
16.1	How to negotiate a win-win agreement	83
17	**Motivating people**	**84**
17.1	How to get someone to do what they have said they will do – by Obstacle Analysis	84

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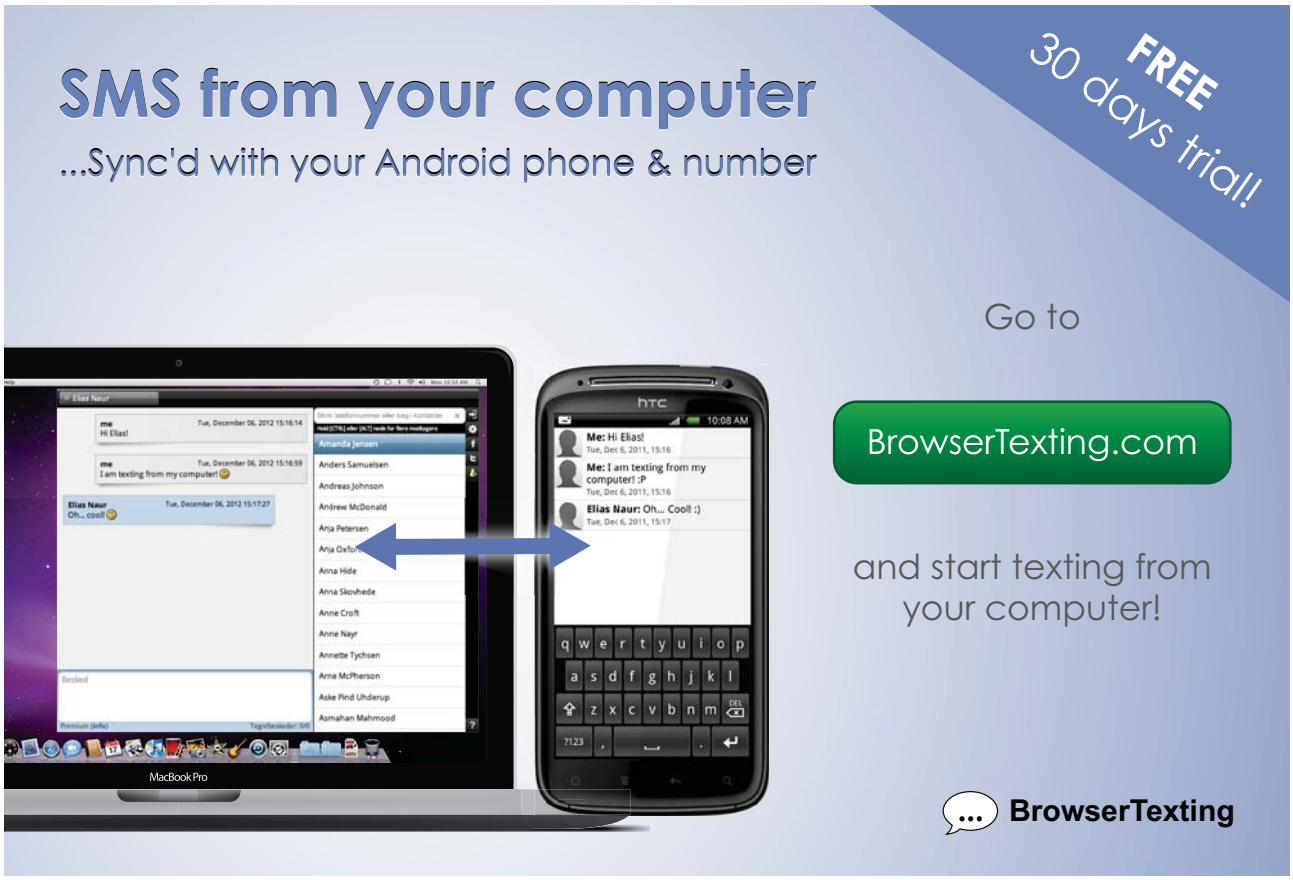
18	**Giving very bad news in a humane way**	**85**
18.1	How to give very bad news	87
19	**Getting a busy person's attention**	**88**
19.1	How to get a busy person's attention	89
20	**Repairing relationships**	**90**
20.1	Repairing relationships	90
21	**List of practical guidelines included in the book**	**91**
22	**Reading**	**93**



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Preface

Skills with People
a training programme for managers and professional people at all levels
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• how you could connect better with others,
• what mental habits are getting in the way.
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Only connect. E.M. Forster, Howard's End

To understand another person's thoughts and feelings thoroughly, with the meanings they have for him, and to be understood by this person in return – this is one of the most rewarding of human experiences, and all too rare. Carl Rogers, On Becoming a Person

About the subject matter of this book

Why is it *'all too rare'* for human beings to experience a true meeting of minds, to really '*connect*', to *'understand one-another thoroughly'*? Although we *want* it – and may even have a *yearning* for it – there is a fundamental difficulty, even for those of us with similar backgrounds and speaking the same language. We each inhabit a private world, have an inner life we can observe directly through a mysterious faculty we call consciousness – a mind busy with our own sensations, memories, thoughts, feelings, hopes and fears. But we have no direct access to *one-another's* private world, we can only guess at it and often our guesses are wrong. It is much easier to misunderstand than to understand one-another.

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How then can we make better connections? It depends on the quality of the signals we send to and receive from one-another. One of our signalling methods is conversation, and *that* is what this book is about – *what kind of conversation creates good enough connections for us to live and work successfully and harmoniously together*?

About the book

It teaches a powerful blend of the two most crucial conversation skills, *empathy* and *assertiveness*. We all have these skills to some degree, or at least the potential for them. They are in our genes. They may have gone rusty or been blunted by life's experiences but they are recoverable. The book aims to help you recover them. It is a *how-do-you-actually-say-it* book, packed with clear *guidelines* and *examples* you can apply to your own difficult conversations.

Part One familiarises you with the two skills, shows you how to use them *separately*, and identifies common mental habits that get in the way. Mental habits matter. They are the reason why these skills are not easy. Becoming *aware* of them is a step towards laying them aside.

Part Two shows how the two skills in combination create an extremely effective way of communicating, and how you can use this in a variety of difficult conversations. With Part One as a foundation you can select the most relevant chapters in Part Two.

About the author

This book is the fruit of 35 years' endeavour with my wife, Rosemary, creating, developing and running a management training course called, "Skills with People". In 2005 our son, Alex, joined us in this work. The course has a reputation as one of the most effective available in the UK. Many hundreds of managers and professional people from business and industry have been through our hands. My own BA degree is in philosophy. Rosemary has an MA in education, Alex, a BSc in psychology. He is a practising psycho-synthesis counsellor. We run the Skills with People course regularly in the UK and also offer to bring the training to you in-house. Our website is: www.gouldtraining.co.uk.

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About the main sources of the thinking in the book

The book presents the ideas we have developed together and teach on the "Skills with People" course. Our gratitude goes first to our clients. They have taught us how to help them not only learn the skills, but also *unlearn* the mental habits that get in the way. Their enthusiasm to put what they learn to the test and their feedback about what works and what they find difficult helps us continually learn and develop what we teach.

Our understanding of the two crucial skills has been profoundly shaped by Carl Rogers, the pioneering psychologist. His *open-minded and generous-hearted way of tuning in to the feelings of others* we see as the essence of *empathy*. And his *honest and genuine way of admitting his own feelings* we see as the essence of *assertiveness*. These two ingredients, he believed, can have a beneficial effect on *any* relationship.

Our understanding of why these skills are so beneficial comes from our interest in psycho-therapy, counselling, and the subject of 'emotional intelligence'. The core of it, it seems to us, is that when people suppress feelings they bottle them up and store them as tension, and emotional tension that cannot be released is harmful. As well as being *physically* harmful it locks people into a *defensive and irrational state of mind* and damages relationships. The great benefit of the way of communicating taught in this book is that it helps people let off steam, release tension, recover their rational faculties and heal their relationships.

Your feedback

We have a life-long drive to try to make sense of the chaos of human relationships and to share this with others. We would love to know how you are getting on with the guidelines suggested in the book. Please feel free to email us at phil@gouldtraining.co.uk telling us about what you have tried and with what result, where you feel good about it, and where you feel disappointed. And please let us know if there are other difficult situations you would have liked the book to touch on.

Philip Gould 2013

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Part One
The two crucial skills

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1 Introduction

We have tried to boil the art of connecting with people down to its simplest basic ingredients (*simple* is not the same thing as *easy*). If I want to improve the connection between us there are *two and only two* things I need do. One is make sure *I* understand *you*, the other is make sure *you* understand *me*. The first is to do with how I *listen*, the second with how I *speak*.

If this sounds a little too simple and obvious, what is perhaps *not* so simple and obvious is the *quality* of listening and speaking needed. It makes all the difference when the listening is done with *empathy* and the speaking is done *assertively*. These two skills produce a relaxed and safe atmosphere of mutual understanding, respect, honesty and trust – crucial for winning people's cooperation. By using these skills I can take the initiative in improving our relationship – I do not need to wait for *you* to make the first move.

The word *'skill'* needs a caution. These are not like manual skills, such as driving a car, which once developed we can use automatically while our mind and heart are somewhere else. They require our full attention. They are skills of the *heart*, ways of expressing our whole self and helping another person do the same. They are ways of making an honest connection with another person.

1.1 Example of the two crucial skills in action

Here is a brief phone conversation – first *without* and then *with* the two crucial skills. The comparison shows how much more honest and yet harmonious they enable us to be.

Anita is phoning Steve because she urgently needs his help. Steve is normally cooperative, but right now he is in the middle of a crisis. As you read the dialogue try to sense the emotional atmosphere – imagine what it *feels like* taking part:-

ANITA: *Good morning, Steve. Anita here.*

STEVE: *Good morning, Anita. What can I do for you?*

ANITA: *That information I asked you for last week – how's it coming along?*

STEVE: *Sorry. Haven't had a moment to think about it. I'll get on to it as soon as I can.*

ANITA: *You said I could have it this week.*

STEVE: *I know, but there's a bit of a crisis on here.*

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ANITA: *When will I be able to have it?*

STEVE: *Hard to say.*

ANITA: *Can't you give me a date?*

STEVE: *Afraid not. You'll just have to leave it with me. I'll get on to it as soon as I can, okay?*

ANITA: *Okay.*

On the surface the conversation is polite. But can you sense how disconnected they are, and that the tension between them is rising? Below is the same conversation with a commentary in brackets showing what is going on beneath the surface:-

ANITA (has a crucial deadline to meet, so she is on tender-hooks as she picks up the phone; needs Steve's cooperation but has no control over his priorities; is nervous of antagonising him because she knows she cannot do her job without his cooperation): *Good morning, Steve. Anita here.*

STEVE (normally willing and helpful, but right now anxious, preoccupied and wary, with very little attention for anything except his current crisis): *Good morning, Anita. What can I do for you?*

ANITA (hopeful but still nervous): *That information I asked you for last week – how's it coming along?*

STEVE (has a twinge of guilt, and assumes she'll be annoyed about the delay): *Sorry, Anita – haven't had a moment to think about it. I'll get on to it as soon as I can.*

ANITA (has a strong surge of disappointment, which she tries to hide): *You said I could have it this week.*

STEVE (starts to feel accused): *I know, but there's a bit of a crisis going on here.*

ANITA (now frustrated and angry, but tries not to show it): *When will I be able to have it?*

STEVE (now resentful and unwilling to take her into his confidence): *Hard to say.*

ANITA (feels desperate): *Can't you give me a date?*

STEVE (coldly dismissive): *Afraid not. You'll just have to leave it with me. I'll get on to it as soon as I can, okay?*

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ANITA (afraid that if she pushes harder she'll get a reputation for being aggressive): *Okay.* (puts the phone down and silently screams with frustration)

Anita is aware of feelings beneath the surface, but she is held back by an old mental habit, a belief she has held deep down for as long as she can remember: *"My feelings are not to be trusted. I must hide them or people won't like me."* As a result she keeps her distance and fails to connect with Steve.

But suppose she could replace *that* belief with *this* one: *"I can trust my feelings. They alert me when something needs my attention, and if I express them honestly others will take me seriously."* Below is the conversation again. This time, as well as having a different underlying belief, she uses the skills taught in this book. Once again, as you read the dialogue try to sense what it *feels like* – for each of them:-

ANITA: *Good morning, Steve. Anita here.*

STEVE: *Good morning, Anita. What can I do for you?*

ANITA (lets him know she is aware he is under pressure and how she feels about chasing him; is also frank about her own urgent need): *Steve, I know you're under pressure so I feel bad about chasing you. But I'm very worried. If I don't get the information you promised me last week I'll miss a crucial deadline.*

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STEVE (takes her seriously because she is being honest about how she **feels**; and it does not even occur to him to shut the door on her because she is taking **his** problems seriously; he feels he can be honest with her, too): *Sorry, Anita. This is a bad timing, I'm afraid. I'm in the middle of a crisis. I was hoping the information you needed wasn't urgent.*

ANITA (once again makes him aware how she feels, and this time she says why her need is so urgent): *Now I'm even more worried. If I miss this deadline we could lose a major customer.*

STEVE (now realises that whatever difficulties he faces, even more trouble will be caused if he fails to cooperate; starts thinking about how he can make time to do it): *Hmm, I see.*

ANITA (can hear he is thinking, so waits patiently and encourages him time to let off steam): *I'm obviously giving you a headache.*

STEVE (sighs): *I'll have to explain to my director why he'll have to wait. He's not going to like it.*

ANITA (continues to be patient and honest): *I wish I didn't have to add to your pressures. Is there any way I can help?*

STEVE (lets out another big sigh; has by now adjusted to doing something he was at first reluctant to do): *No, it's okay Anita. I guess it's not the end of the world. I'll get on to it right away.*

ANITA (once again genuine and honest): *I'm relieved. Thank you, Steve.*

This time, instead of ending up afraid and suspicious of one-another they ended up with more mutual respect, understanding and trust. How did Anita achieve this? She talked about her own and Steve's feelings, and that enabled them to resolve their difficulty rationally and harmoniously. The skills she used were:-

- recognising, respecting and acknowledging *his* feelings and needs – this is what we are calling *empathy*,
- honestly admitting *her own* feelings and needs – this is what we are calling *assertiveness*.

1.2 Why are these skills so effective?

In his book, "Emotional Intelligence", Daniel Goleman surveys human brain research and explains why people become irrational when their emotions are aroused. He explains why we are more successful in life and at work if we are aware of, can admit, and can talk about feelings. He puts forward the concept of "emotional intelligence", and defines it as a set of learnable skills. The heart of it is the awareness of and ability to verbalise *feelings*, and the two central skills in his set are *empathy* and *assertiveness*.

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Although these skills are simple and learnable, they go against the grain for many of us, because we have been brought up to fear and suppress feelings: *"There, there, don't cry", "Pull yourself together", "Let's be rational – let's not get emotional"*. Behind these common phrases is a belief that there is something wrong with admitting and expressing feelings, that the more we express a bad feeling the worse we feel, that if we stop expressing it we will feel better, and that the best way to stop people being irrational is to discourage them from expressing feelings.

But like many of the beliefs that hold us back from expressing ourselves, this is a mistake. Much nearer the truth is the following: *Bottling up feelings makes us less, not more, rational. The more we can admit and express feelings the more rational we are able to be. If we want to influence and persuade people – make them more receptive to new ideas and to change – we need to encourage them to express their feelings and let off steam.*

The diagram below shows the value of being aware of, admitting and expressing feelings, and the consequences of not doing so:-

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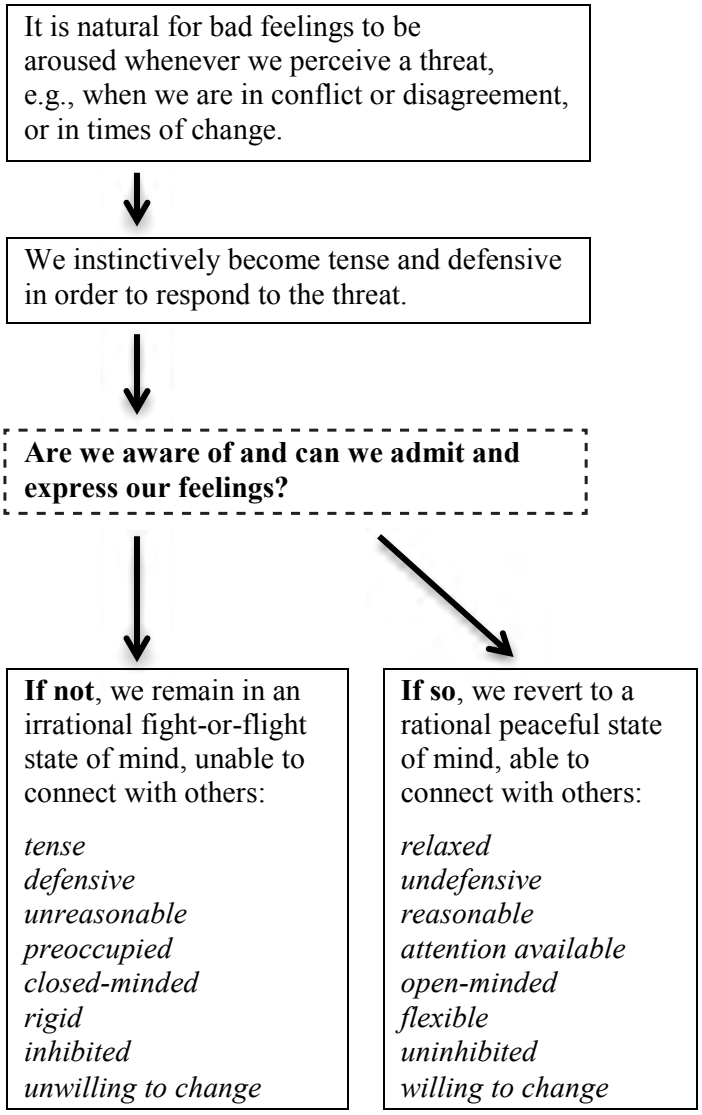
1.2.1 The way we handle feelings


It is natural for bad feelings to be aroused whenever we perceive a threat, e.g., when we are in conflict or disagreement, or in times of change.
We instinctively become tense and defensive in order to respond to the threat.
Are we aware of and can we admit and express our feelings?
If not, we remain in an irrational fight-or-flight state of mind, unable to connect with others:
tense
defensive
unreasonable
preoccupied
closed-minded
rigid
inhibited
unwilling to change
If so, we revert to a rational peaceful state of mind, able to connect with others:
relaxed
undefensive
reasonable
attention available
open-minded
flexible
uninhibited
willing to change

Feelings are our life force – our vitality. Provided we can admit and express them they can be the source of our personal authority, freedom and integrity. Bottling them up or suppressing them when we are under stress causes a loss of vitality, confuses our thinking, and keeps us in a disconnected, defensive, uncreative, self-limiting and restricted state of mind.

Talking about feelings is a safe way of expressing them and enables us to connect with others and recover the full use of our rational faculties. Empathy and assertiveness are the skills that help us do this.

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2 Empathy

Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. Stephen Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People

Our first reaction to most of the statements which we hear from other people is an immediate evaluation or judgement, rather than an understanding of it. 'That's right', or 'That's stupid', or 'That's unreasonable', or 'That's correct'. Very rarely do we permit ourselves to understand precisely what the meaning of his statement is to him. Carl Rogers, On Becoming a Person

Empathy is paying full attention to what is going on in someone *else's* mind. The difficulty we all have with this is that we are usually distracted by what is going on in our *own* mind. To pay attention to someone *else* we must first find a way to flick the switch – to divert our attention from the noise in our own minds, to give ourselves permission to set aside for a while our own sensations, memories, opinions, prejudices, thoughts and feelings, so that we can tune in to what is going on in *their* mind.

Flicking this switch is a deliberate choice. But many of us never make it. We are so engrossed in our own private world that we assume it is the only world there is. If we are interested in others at all it is only in so far as *their* thoughts and attitudes relate to our *own*. We are not interested in *their* inner world in its own right. We rarely take the trouble to step with an open mind into *their* shoes and try to imagine what *their* experience of life is like, what things look like from *their* point of view, what matters most to *them*. We hardly ever *do* empathy. So we are rarely if ever really *present* for them – physically, yes, but not mentally or emotionally. And usually we are unaware of this, totally oblivious of how disconnected we are.

If you want to train yourself to pay more generous attention to others, how can you do it? A practical way is to focus your attention deliberately on specific questions about *them*, as shown below. Here is the first of 25 sets of practical *guidelines* in the book, giving clear instructions on what to focus your mind on and what words to use:-

Guidelines

2.1 How to listen with empathy

Pay very close attention to the other person in order to learn three things, and then say them as briefly as you can in your own words:-

1. **How they feel** (Try to name their feeling, e.g., *"You sound relieved," "You don't look too happy," "I imagine you must be frustrated"*.)

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2. **What the feeling is about** (What specific event or experience are they reacting to? What has happened?)
3. **Why they are reacting this way** (What specific need, belief or difficulty of theirs is making them react this way? In other words, what really *matters* to them?)

Then **pause** and keep paying attention, giving them time to let off steam, time to think, and time to say more. When they *do* say more, repeat the process.

At first you may be uncomfortable with this way of listening because you are not used to it. But it is worth persisting, because if you do you will soon begin to notice the satisfaction and pleasure it gives people when you try to see things from their point of view. For them it will be a rare experience, and the penny will eventually drop for you that in giving them your attention in this way you are giving them a generous gift. This is not a mechanical or artificial technique, but a way of making a genuine connection. Every-day life provides frequent opportunities to practise – as shown in these examples:-

Example 1 – Imagine you are trying to get someone working for you to change the way they do a particular task. They say, "*Okay, I'll do it if you really want me to. But I've never done it this way before*".

Now imagine yourself in their shoes in order to select which of the following three replies makes them feel most understood:-

A: *Yes I do want you to. Thank you.*

B: *You don't sound very happy about it. It's probably because you don't like change.*

C: *You don't sound very happy about it. I sense you're worried you'll make mistakes if you change to the new method. I know how much it matters to you to get things right.*

Response A shows no empathy at all, and risks the task not being done to your satisfaction. B picks up their reluctance, but risks giving an insult by interpreting it in a way they would hardly be proud to admit to even if it were true, so this is not really *empathy*.

C shows a more generous level of understanding and connects better. If your guess about the reason for their reluctance is wrong, they can easily put you right. By finding out what is actually bothering them you are much more likely to be able deal with their difficulty and get the task done to your satisfaction with their whole-hearted commitment.

Example 2 – Empathy is often missing from our conversations. When it is present the conversations are much more satisfying. Here is a fairly normal brief exchange *without* empathy. Imagine you are the woman, and try to sense the atmosphere – how the conversation is making her *feel*:-

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HE: *How was your day?*

SHE: *Awful.*

HE: *Me too. The car broke down.*

SHE: *I've been telling you for weeks the car needs a service. My boss was in a bad mood again.*

HE: *You should look for another job.*

How *understood* did she feel at the end of this conversation? Try to score how she felt on a scale from zero (= totally misunderstood) to 10 (= perfectly understood).

Here they are again, but this time the man gives her his full attention, listening with empathy:-

HE: *How was your day?*

SHE: *Awful.*

HE: *Sorry to hear that.*

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SHE: *My boss was in a bad mood again.*

HE: *You sound very upset.*

SHE: *I am! I'm beginning to think I should get another job.*

HE: *It's as serious as that then?*

SHE: *Yes, it's horrible being shouted at when all you're doing is trying to help. It's making me nervous about going to work in the morning.*

HE: *That's why you don't feel you want to put up with it any longer.*

SHE: *Exactly! I think I'll start making enquiries about other jobs in the morning.*

HE: *I'm sorry it's turned out this way.*

SHE: *Me, too! How was **your** day?*

HE: *The car broke down. I missed my appointment.*

SHE: *How aggravating! You've been working so hard lately I've been worried about you. You haven't even had time to service the car.*

How different was the atmosphere this time? How understood did the woman feel (0–10)? Notice how the empathy she received created an atmosphere in which she could also empathise with him.

Example 3 – Here is a situation encountered every day by sales people – a customer raises an objection when an estate agent is showing her around a house. She says, *"There isn't much built-in cupboard space, is there?"* Imagine you are the customer. How understood do each of the three responses below make you feel (0–10)?

A: *I see what you mean, but in view of the house's many attractive features surely you agree its good value.*

B: *Yes, but have you seen the garden? There's room there to build as much storage space as you want.*

C: *That obviously bothers you. I get the impression you like the house but can't see where you would keep all your belongings.*

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A and B are attempts to *reason* with the customer – but the trouble is she is unreceptive to reason because something is *bothering* her. Response C helps her admit and express the underlying feeling, let off steam, clear her mind and think afresh. She would probably not have mentioned the built-in cupboard space unless she liked the house, and if she really *does* like it you are helping her open her mind to the idea that the time might have come to get rid if some of the clutter she no longer needs.

Why not experiment, when you have the opportunity, with your own responses to the things people say. Pay attention to *the feelings behind their words*. You will soon experience the difference it makes when you set your own thoughts and feelings aside in order to give your full attention to someone else.

2.2 The difference between empathy and sympathy

Example 4 – For some people empathy and sympathy are the same. But it does not matter what we *call* it, because this is not about the meaning of words. There is a distinction to be understood between two quite different ways of seeing people.

Imagine someone comes to you and says: *"I don't know what to do. I can't cope with this. It's getting me down."* If you were their parent or their manager, which of the following two responses would you prefer to make?

A: *Oh, you poor thing. It's obviously too much for you. Let me help. I'll see if I can find a way to relieve you of the problem.*

B: *You seem very worried. Let's look together at exactly what the difficulty is. Perhaps I can help you discover how you can get on top of it.*

Both responses show compassion and a wish to be helpful, but there is a big difference. Response A is sorry for people and tries to rescue them. This is what *we* call *sympathy*. B is what we call *empathy*. It sees the best in people – their potential – and wants to help them see it in themselves. It helps them face their difficulties. It aims to develop their self-confidence, determination and sense of responsibility.

People learn important lessons about themselves from our responses to them, because how we see them – though we may not realise it – is how we are teaching them to see themselves. The trouble with sympathy is it encourages people to be sorry for themselves – *"Ah, poor me. If only this hadn't happened to me."* It teaches them to see themselves as victims. It encourages them in a belief full of fear – *"I'm not the sort of person who can cope when this sort of thing happens to me"*. And this of course is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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Empathy on the other hand teaches something quite different: *"I'll find a way to manage this difficulty because that's the sort of person I am. Let me see what valuable lesson for life I can learn from this experience?"* This too is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

2.3 Common mental habits that get in the way of empathy

Connecting well with others is not easy. There may be obstacles – common mental habits that get in the way. The trouble with habits we are unaware of is they exert hidden power over us. The first step in overcoming them is becoming *aware* of them. Which of the following are you aware of in yourself?

1. **The belief that since you are not much good at empathy there's no point in really trying**. This belief is obviously another self-fulfilling prophecy. How about simply laying it aside? You will find the practice of empathy very rewarding.
2. **Preoccupation with one's own thoughts**. Some people only understand others whose thoughts coincide with their own. They have yet to learn that they are perfectly free to flick the switch – lay aside their *own* thoughts and focus completely on someone *else's*.

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3. **The spectacles through which we see another person are rarely pure and clear. They are very often tinted or contaminated by our own opinions and prejudices**. Usually we are oblivious of this and assume that people really *are* as we think we *see* them. The thought that perhaps they are not, and that the image we have of them is not really *them* at all but an *interpretation* of them, a picture painted by *us*, may be unwelcome. But we all have this tendency, and it helps if we are aware of it.
4. **A sense of similarity with the person one is listening to or with what they are talking about**. It is very easy to make assumptions. One is that the problem one is listening to is similar to a problem of one's own. Instead of listening with an open mind, one listens selectively for evidence to support the assumption that the problem is similar to one's own and that one's own solution will be useful to the other person – but it rarely is.
5. **Solutionitis**. Some people are so keen to offer a solution that they jump prematurely to the wrong conclusion about what the other person's problem is. Instead of keeping an open mind they try to make the problem fit the solution they already have in mind.
6. **Fear of hearing a problem to which one does not know the answer**. Some people believe that if they cannot produce an answer they are, or are seen to be, failing to live up to expectations. The result can be that they try to relate everything they hear to the things to which they already know the answers. They are afraid to hear anything else.
7. **Discomfort in talking about feelings**. Some people are not used to talking about feelings, are uncomfortable about it, and rarely do it. Perhaps they are assuming others will be embarrassed, but actually people normally find talking about feelings a relief.
8. **Lack of awareness of feelings**. Some people have trained themselves to avoid thinking about feelings. They have a strong drive to be rational and logical, and have believed that emotion clouds logic. This is a mistake. It is *suppression* of emotion that clouds logic. But the result of this belief is that they are out of practice at recognizing feelings, not just their *own*, but *other people's* too.

2.4 Frequently asked questions

What attitude do I need to have to listen to someone with empathy?

Empathy is *generous* and *patient*. It suspends critical judgment and looks for the best in people. It values them even knowing their failings. It looks for a favourable interpretation of what they say and do, one they would feel proud to admit to, rather than a negative one. It assumes they mean well. It tries to discover how *they* see things and what *matters* to them, not in order to agree or disagree but in order to learn, appreciate and respect. It reassures them that whatever their concern is, and however they express it, it deserves respect. When we offer *this* kind of attention people feel they can trust us and find relief in taking us into their confidence.

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Which comes first, the skill or the attitude?

But do we need to have a perfect attitude before we begin to practise the skill? Practising the skill will train you to see people in a different way, because the more you understand, the more you appreciate and the less you judge.

What effect does my listening with empathy have on the person I am listening to?

The acid test of your listening is its immediate effect on the person you are listening to – *how understand do they feel?* If you fail this test you are unlikely to win their trust and cooperation even if you privately understand everything they say. There are two ways of knowing how understood they feel:-

- The experience of being well understood is so satisfying, relieving, unusual and surprising that people often respond spontaneously by saying, *"Exactly!"* (or words to that effect). If you get this kind of response you know you are doing a good job.
- You can ask, *"How understood have I made you feel on a scale from 0–10?"* The answer, though subjective, is both easy to give and reliable. You can then judge your listening for *yourself* by the score you get on this scale. A score of 8 or above says you are doing okay. 7 or below says they would like it better if you paid more attention.

How accurate do I have to be when reflecting back people's feelings?

Don't worry if your guess is not 100% correct. It shows you are trying to understand. It will feel good to them that you are making the effort. They know it is only a guess, and it gives them an opportunity to correct you if you're wrong.

What is reflective listening?

Reflective listening is mirroring back in your own words what someone seems to be telling you. Sometimes, but not always, it helps to have a verbal handle for this, e.g., *"Let me make sure I've understood you…", "What you seem to be saying is…", "From what you say I get the impression that…".* Behind a reflective statement is an implied invitation to correct you if you are wrong.

Why are we suggesting reflective statements work better than asking questions?

It is easier just to ask, *"How do you feel?"*, but there are three reasons why we suggest you use reflective statements instead:-

- If you are paying close attention you will almost certainly have picked up non-verbal as well as verbal clues about how someone feels. Why pretend you haven't? Your reflective statement is an open display of your attention, and gives them an opportunity to correct you if you're wrong. In making the reflective statement you are not *leading* them – putting thoughts in their mind – you are *following* them and trying to keep up with them.

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- If you ask them how they feel, they start thinking about it and analysing it. This kind of thought process takes place on a different part of the mind (and brain) from the part where they experience feelings. But if, instead, you say, *"From the expression on your face you don't seem very happy about this"*, they are much more likely to let off steam spontaneously, because an observation like this bypasses the analytical part of the mind and touches their feelings more directly.
- Sometimes people find questions invasive, e.g., *"How do you feel about…?"* There is less danger of this with a reflective statement, provided its tone implies an invitation to correct you if you are wrong, e.g., *"I get the impression you're not very happy about…?"*

Does the size of my vocabulary for describing feelings matter?

The answer is no. It is not necessary to have a large vocabulary to be successful with empathy. And the same thing goes for speaking assertively. However restricted you feel your vocabulary is, it is good enough. It is perfectly okay to use to words like *good, bad, okay, not okay, happy, unhappy, pleased, not pleased*. The important thing is to communicate honestly how you feel with the truest words you can find, and to be interested in how others feel, too. And people do *not* feel insulted if you misread their feeling, because it gives them a chance to say how they *really* feel.

Have I got the balance right between listening and speaking?

If you do all the talking and no listening your connection with the other person is bound to be poor, and they are unlikely to get much satisfaction. But you can also be out of balance in the opposite direction, by listening all the time and giving very little away of your *own* thoughts and feelings. Each of us has developed a different *balance* between listening and speaking. It is a habit we are often unaware of, but once we become aware of it we can change it. One of the benefits of the skills in this book is that they make us think about how our own conversations are going. They make us more aware of *both* sides of the equation, that is, whether we have the balance right between *giving* and *receiving* attention.

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3 Coaching with empathy

When someone comes to you with a problem what *method* do you use? Are you aware what your preferred method *is* and its *affect* on the person you are trying to help?

In this situation most managers and professional people automatically assume the role of problem solver. Solving problems is one of the skills that got them where they are. They are well practised at it and enjoy it. It has become a habit – probably an unconscious one. But though sometimes it is the best way to coach people, it can often be even more helpful to listen with empathy *instead*. What difference would this make?

When you take on the role of problem solver your mind is focussed not on the *person* but on the *problem*, so the first thing you do is try to understand the problem. Rather like a doctor diagnosing a patient's medical problem you obtain the facts by asking questions. But the effect of your questions is, perhaps unintentionally, to put *you* in charge. You take the mentally *active* role, leaving them with the *passive* role of supplying information on request. They follow *your* lead, as shown in the diagram below:-

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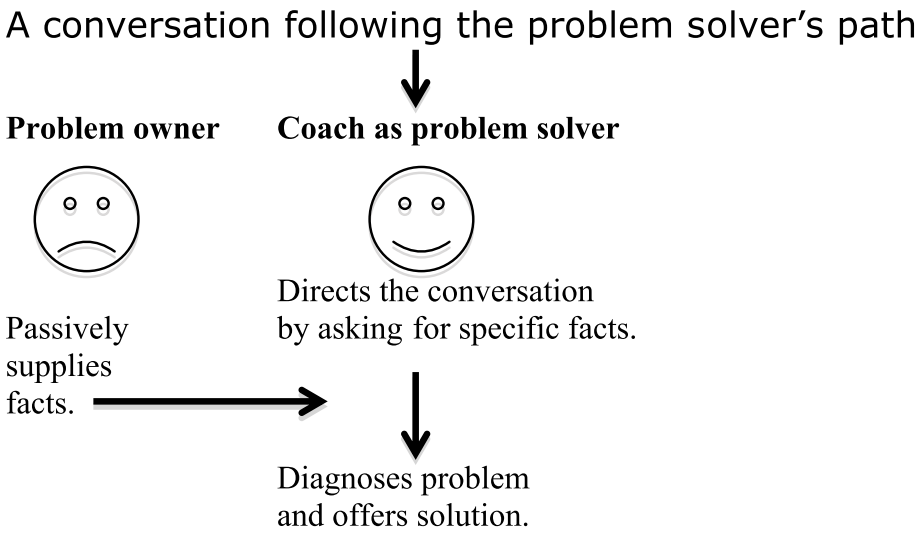
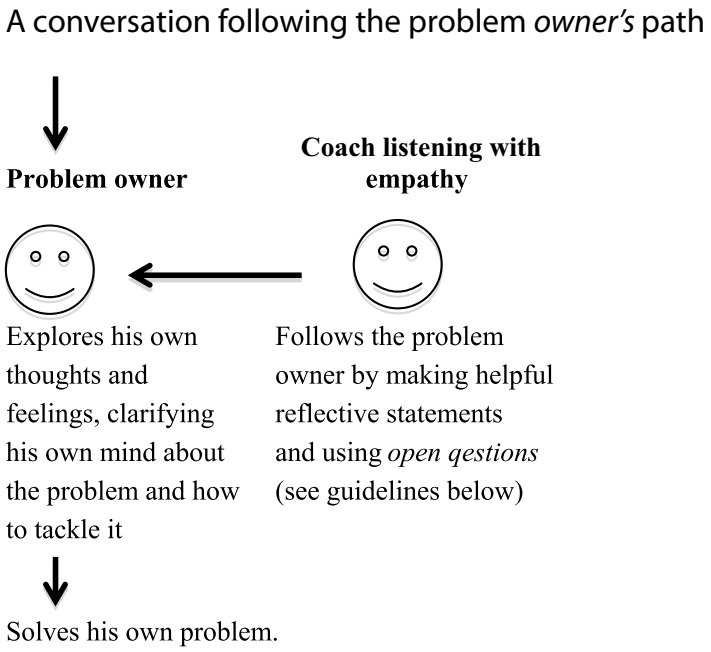

A conversation following the problem solver's path
Problem owner
Coach as problem solver
Directs the conversation by asking for specific facts.
Passively supplies facts.
Diagnoses problem and offers solution.

The big difference between this and listening with empathy is the focus of your attention. Listening with empathy focuses not on the problem but on *what is going on in the mind of the problem owner*. Your objective is now quite different. You are aiming not to solve the problem *for* him but to help *him* solve it. And in order to achieve *this* you use a very different technique. Instead of asking for specific facts, you use a combination of *reflective listening* and *open questions* (see below). As a result, instead forcing him to follow *your* lead, you follow *his* – as shown below:-


A conversation following the problem *owner's* path
Problem owner
Coach listening with empathy
Explores his own thoughts and feelings, clarifying his own mind about the problem and how to tackle it
Follows the problem owner by making helpful reflective statements and using *open qestions* (see guidelines below)
Solves his own problem.

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Guidelines

3.1 Using open questions

An open question, unlike a question asking for a specific fact, gives the problem owner freedom to answer without restriction and implies that you are interested in whatever they have to say. Below are 8 open questions you can use when listening to someone with a problem. They help the problem owner explore the problem from a variety of different angles:-

1. *How do they feel?* (Try to name their feeling or feelings).
2. *Precisely what is the feeling is about?* (In other words, what has happened?)
3. *Why does it matter to them? What is the underlying belief, value or need behind this feeling?*
4. *How they have tried to tackle it or thought of tackling it?*
5. *What specific obstacle has prevented them from resolving it?*
6. *What would they **ideally** like? What do they **really** want?*
7. *What will be the consequence if they do nothing about it?*
8. *Now having thought more about it, what further help do they need from you, if any?*

Question 8 gives you an opportunity to give advice *if needed*. Having listened so attentively you are now in a better position to give advice if you have any, and the problem owner is more likely both to be receptive and to find your advice relevant and useful.

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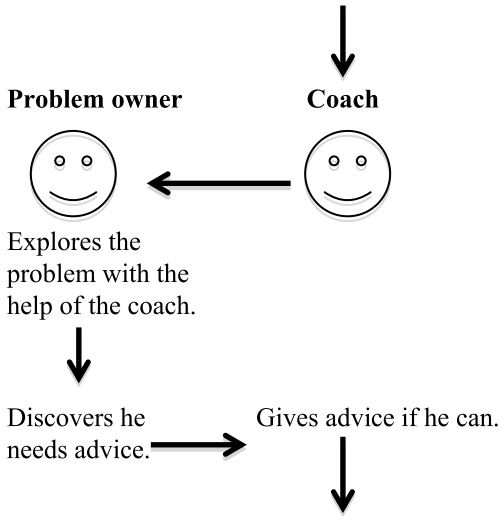
Three practical tips on using these questions:-

- Instead of *asking* the questions, try *answering* them and reflecting back the answers, e.g., *"What you seem to be saying is…"*. This is harder work but is more helpful, because by holding up a mirror to the problem owner it helps him be more aware of and think again about what is going on in his own mind.
- A good listener makes as much use as he can of the information he has *already* received before asking for more.
- *Never* give advice before exploring at least some of these open questions.

The diagram below shows the coach giving advice only *after* listening with empathy



The urge to rush in and give advice is a common obstacle to effective coaching. By making the effort to listen with empathy you can learn much more about the problem, and then, if advice is needed, it will be more relevant and helpful.

Example Imagine that Viv, a member of your staff, is in difficulties. Her problem is that she takes on too much work. She is losing the confidence of the people who use her services because she is often very late in completing their work. She says, "*Everyone says their work is urgent and that I'm the only one who can do it. It's impossible. I just can't cope.*"

How would you try to help her? Here are three possible ways:-

First way:- **Give quick advice**

YOU: *Never accept work unless you know you have time to complete it. Just tell them when you're too busy. Okay?*

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VIV: *Okay.* (But the problem continues and she leaves the job.)

Your advice is probably correct. It is what *you* would do in Viv's position. But the trouble is – there's an obstacle in the way. So although it may be good advice, it is useless to her.

Second way:- **Rescue her**

YOU: *Oh dear. We can't have this. I'll tell you what we'll do. Jean can act as your gatekeeper. People who need your services will have to approach her first to ask if you can do it.*

VIV: *Okay.* (But she soon feels humiliated and quits.)

Third way:- **Coach with empathy**

YOU: *You sound very worried.*

VIV (lets off steam): *I am! It's keeping me awake at night.*

YOU: *I get the impression you're worried about letting people down.*

VIV: *They might think I'm not up to the job.*

YOU: *You think if you say 'no' they'll assume you're not up to the job.*

VIV: *Yes.*

YOU (honestly points out an inconsistency in her story): *But I don't understand. By saying 'yes' when you're too busy to do the work aren't you bringing about the very thing you're afraid of?*

VIV: *Well, yes, I suppose I am. But what should I say when I'm too busy?*

YOU: *What stops you simply telling the truth?*

VIV: *I hate saying 'no' to people. They'll think I'm just making an excuse.*

YOU: ***Are*** *you just making an excuse?*

VIV: *No. It's the truth.*

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YOU: *I believe you. But **you** seem to believe other people will see it just as an excuse – and **that's** what stops you saying it.*

VIV: *Mmm. I was always taught to get on with things and not make excuses.*

YOU: *You now seem to be wondering if that was such a good lesson.*

VIV: *I can see it's made me dishonest, and I don't like that.*

YOU: *Would you like to learn another way?*

VIV: *Yes, I would.*

YOU: *Imagine I'm bringing you work and you're too busy to do it. And imagine I'll accept whatever you say. What would you like to say to me?*

VIV: *That's easy. Please don't think I'm not willing or not capable of doing your work. It's just that I'm too busy right now because I'm in the middle of a job for someone else. I can do your work later, but not now.*

YOU: *That sounds great to me. Are you comfortable saying it?*

VIV: *Yes, but didn't it sound like an excuse?*

YOU: *What do **you** think?*

VIV: *No, I don't think it did.*

YOU: *I agree. It was so honest it made me trust you. But perhaps you'd find it helpful to see for yourself. You could video it on your smart phone. Then you can see it and practice as often as you like.*

Guidelines

3.2 How to coach

Focus *not* on the problem to be solved or the task to be done by the person you are coaching, but on *what is going on in their mind* – what they *feel*, what they *think*, what *assumptions* they are making, what they *know* and *don't* know. Try to spot what *difficulty* they are having or *obstacle* they are encountering – what is *preventing* them from solving the problem or completing the task.

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The skill you need is listening with empathy together with open questions. Your aim, by helping them identify and remove the obstacle(s), is to enable them to solve the problem or complete the task *themselves*. Give your *advice* only if all else fails. Resist the urge to take the lead by *telling* them or *showing* them how to do it. They will learn far more if you can help them discover for *themselves* what has been holding them back. This kind of coaching is harder work than telling them how to do it, but very rewarding.

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4 Assertiveness

I have found that the more I can be genuine in the relationship, the more helpful it will be. This means that I need to be aware of my own feelings, in so far as possible, rather than presenting an outward façade of one attitude, while actually holding another. Carl Rogers, On Becoming a Person

In this book we define *assertiveness* as behaving in such a way that people know unambiguously where you stand. Your assertiveness makes it easy for them to take you seriously, because without threatening *them* you are being transparently honest and clear about *your own* feelings and needs. The word is often confused with *aggression*. But aggression is quite different in two respects. First, it is *not* transparently honest – of course it is *driven* by feelings but it does not openly *admit* them. Second, it *is* threatening, and therefore it puts people on the defensive.

The key to being assertive is giving yourself permission to *admit* your feelings. If you try to keep the lid on feelings such as anger, worry, suspicion or frustration, they are likely to build up a head of steam and explode or leak out in the form of aggression. Admitting them, bringing them into the conversation, is a safety valve, a safe way of letting off steam, preventing such explosions and leaks, keeping you calm and rational. This is a mirror-image of listening with empathy – enabling the *other person* to admit their feelings, talk about them, let off steam, calm down and be rational.

Assertiveness as we define it is therefore essentially honest. It means being true to yourself, valuing yourself, trusting your own feelings and giving them a firm, clear voice. When you tell others honestly how you feel you will have little difficulty in getting them to believe you and take you seriously. If you are not used to doing this you may be uncomfortable at first. If so, below is a framework that can help. Provided you resolve to speak *the truth* what you say when you speak in this way is likely to be convincing:-

Guidelines

4.1 How to speak assertively

Say, as briefly as you can, three specific and true things about yourself (you can say them without fear of contradiction):-

1. **How you feel** (Name the feeling, e.g., *"I'm very pleased", "I'm not happy" "Now I'm even more alarmed", "I'm concerned", "I'm extremely concerned".*)
2. **What about** (What specific event or experience you are referring to.)
3. **The reason why** (What underlying need, belief or difficulty of yours has caused you to react in this way. In other words, what really *matters* to you.)

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Then **pause and wait.** The pause adds power to your words. Pay close attention and be ready to listen with empathy to the response.

Before looking at examples there is a point to notice here about the use of language. The words, *"I feel"*, can be used in two different ways – and only one of them is what we would call being *assertive*:-

- When you say, *"I feel **that**…"*, you are stating an *opinion*, e.g., *"I feel **that** you're wrong"*, or, *"I feel you're wrong"* (Even without the word, *'that'*, it is still an *opinion*.) The trouble with stating an opinion is it invites argument. Speaking in this way is *not* being assertive – it is a verbal habit that *gets in the way* of being assertive.
- But when you say, *"I feel…"*, followed by a word for an *emotion*, you are stating a *fact*, e.g., *"I feel alarmed"*, or, *"I **am** alarmed"*. (The word, *'am'*, can be used instead of *'feel'*, but it means the same – it discloses a *fact* about your emotion, your inner experience.) This carries much more weight than an *opinion*, provided you also make it clear *what you are alarmed about*, and *why*. People are much more likely to take you seriously if you speak in this way. This *is* being assertive.

Below are guidelines on how to make a complaint using this method of being assertive:-

Guidelines

4.2 How to make a complaint

Here is an assertive way to complain in a restaurant. Say in a quiet but firm and clear voice, *"Waiter, I'm disappointed. It's my steak. I ordered it rare,"* followed by silence in which you gaze at the waiter and wait for him to respond.

Points to notice about this approach:-

- Its economy and clarity – few words, powerful effect. You are giving a simple, straightforward and unambiguous signal.
- Its authority – you are stating a fact no one can argue with, namely, how you feel. You can say it firmly and with conviction. People will normally respond respectfully. There is no need to be aggressive or make a scene.
- You feel better and calmer for saying it, because by admitting and expressing how you feel, and speaking the truth, you are letting off steam and honestly standing up for yourself. Your integrity remains intact.
- By being so specific about how you feel, what about, and why, you are focusing firmly and clearly on the *issue* without attacking the *person*.

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Be patient with yourself when you practise this. You may need to practise in a safe setting before using it out in the world at large. But do experiment in order to see for yourself how extraordinarily well this way of being honestly assertive works?

4.3 The assertive ratchet

Example 2 – But suppose your assertiveness meets with refusal, what can you do then?

The example below shows how to stand your ground and be *very firm* when the need arises. We call this method *the assertive ratchet*. The usefulness of a ratchet is that you can tighten it up notch by notch if necessary in order to prevent what you are gripping from slipping out of your grip. Assertiveness can be used like a ratchet if at first you do not succeed in getting the other person to do what you want.

The example involves Anita, whom you have met before. This time she is dealing not with Steve, but with a less willing colleague, Paul. Put yourself in Paul's shoes and imagine Anita's effect on him each time she uses the ratchet:-

ANITA: *Paul, you remember those figures I asked you for? Are they ready for me yet?*

PAUL: *What figures? No, I'm far too busy. They'll have to wait.*

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ANITA (speaks assertively): *That's worrying. If I don't get them in the next 2 days I'll miss the customer's deadline.*

An honest, assertive response like this is very powerful. Nine times out of ten the person who receives it will find it very hard to resist. But to illustrate how the ratchet works let us imagine Paul *does* resist:-

PAUL: *So what?*

ANITA (ratchets up one notch): *I'm shocked. You seem to be saying you don't care if we lose a customer.*

She doesn't argue, which would make it easy for him to argue back. She simply makes him aware how his response makes her feel and why. Again, an honest, assertive approach like this will normally bring him to his senses. But let us suppose he continues to be difficult:-

PAUL: *Why don't you go away and stop pestering me? Haven't you anything better to do?*

ANITA (ratchets up another notch): *Now I'm **really** worried, Paul, because you seem to be refusing, and without your cooperation I can't do my job.*

Again she doesn't argue. She focuses again on *how she feels right now*, *what about* and *why*. If he goes on refusing after this she can ratchet up to the final notch:-

ANITA: *"**Now** my worry is different. It's about **you**. If you go on refusing you give me no choice but to go over your head to the director, and that could look bad for you."*

It is very unlikely Anita will have to go so far, but the knowledge that she can if she *needs* to gives her the strength to stand her ground.

Guidelines **–**

4.4 How to use the assertive ratchet

Notice how she stays very alert as the conversation moves forward. She never once argues or repeats herself. Once she spoken assertively she moves on, focusing on the next and more immediate issue as soon as it arises. In this way she progressively increases the risk he is taking, but at every step she gives him another chance to change his mind. You need to be on your toes to use the assertive ratchet, but it is satisfyingly effective, and it defines how to be assertive:-

- Use your *feelings* as your source of personal power and authority.
- Speak the truth.

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- Be clear and firm.
- There's no need to be aggressive.
- Don't argue.
- Be economical with words.

All you have to do, if you can be quick-witted enough to do it, is at each moment of the conversation tell the truth about how you feel, what about and why. The assertive ratchet needs practice, but it is a great way to develop the confidence to stand up to people who are being difficult without getting into a fight.

Example 3

Could this be true for you? In meetings when you have a point to make but people are talking loudly and nobody seems interested in you or what you have to say, you are sometimes at a loss for what to do. You are only too well aware from experience that expressing opinions leads to argument, and because you hate arguing you keep quiet.

There are two ways you could experiment with of getting people's attention, one with *assertiveness*, and the other with *empathy*, as shown in the guidelines below:-

Guidelines

4.5 How to get people's attention in a meeting

The **assertive** way is to say, loud enough to be heard, *"I want to make a point. What worries (alarms/ concerns) me is… The reason why I'm so worried about it is…"*, followed by a pause. Few words – powerful effect. What you are stating is not an *opinion* but a *fact* no one can argue with, because you are the one person qualified to say it. You can say it quietly but confidently and firmly because you really *mean* it. Of course, you need to be clear in your own mind exactly what your concern *is* and *why you are concerned*.

The other way is to use **empathy**. Say, loud enough to be heard, *"I get the impression that what worries (alarms/concerns) you is…and the reason why it worries you is…"*, followed by a pause allowing them to respond. This will help your colleagues focus their minds on the main issue they are discussing. It also gets their attention – they are likely then to be interested in what *you* think about it.

4.6 Common mental habits that prevent assertiveness

Assertiveness is as crucial as empathy for connecting well with others. But many of us are prevented from being assertive by mental habits we are unaware of. The first step in overcoming them is to become aware of them. Which of the following do you recognize in yourself?

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1. **Lack of awareness of my own feelings**. Many of us are too busy thinking about the past, planning the future, reacting to events, trying to solve problems, to ask ourselves, *"What am I experiencing **right now**?"* We make no time to tune in to our own feelings. It may be that we do not like to dwell on them because they are uncomfortable, but one of the consequences of shutting them off is that it severely limits our ability to connect with others. How can you be assertive if you are unaware how you feel right now? (You might find *The Power of Now*, by Eckhart Tolle, helpful on this.)
2. **Reluctance to express feelings**. Many of us have been brought up not to express feelings. We may be afraid that they will get out of control. So it may come as a relief to realise that talking about feelings acts as a safety valve, preventing the build-up of tension and destructive outbursts.
3. **The belief that other people know how I feel without being told.** Being assertive is making my feelings known. The reason many people do not do this is a belief that their feelings are *already* known. But this is probably wrong. Other people are usually unaware of our feelings. If we want them to know, we have to *tell* them.
4. **Fear of being disliked.** Some people find it hard to be assertive because they believe it will make them disliked. But, again, this belief is wrong. Most people react to frankness, firmness and assertiveness with respect rather than dislike, and if you couple it with *empathy* it is hard for them dislike you.

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5. **Mismatch between verbal and non-verbal behaviour**. When what you say is matched by tone of voice, facial expression, pace, posture and gesture, the message you send is convincing. But when there is a mismatch, people get confused and end up not trusting you. Incompatible non-verbal habits need to be identified – if you think you have some, you could ask a friend to point them out. (But rather than going into a detailed analysis of non-verbal behaviour, it will probably be more helpful to consider item 6.)
6. **Not saying what I mean as though I really mean it.** If you wish to become more congruent, simply practise *saying what you mean as though you really mean it – as if your life and theirs depended on being taken seriously*. When you do *this*, incongruent habits fall away. Each of us has our own unique way of speaking when we really mean what we say. You needn't to try to mimic others. Your *own* way is the right way for *you*.
7. **Expecting failure**. Some of us do not realise we carry around with us, probably unconsciously, a belief we will fail. This is another of those self-fulfilling prophecies as long as we believe it – and some people belief it throughout their lives. We are reluctant to assert what we want because deep down we are convinced we will not get it or do not deserve it, and the anticipated failure is too painful to risk. It is hardly surprising we have a lot of disappointment. Self-limiting beliefs are wrong and can be changed. But before changing them we have to realise we *have* them – they have to be brought to the surface where we can see them and challenge them. Talking about them to someone who can listen patiently and with empathy can help.
8. **Stating my *opinion* rather than saying how I *feel*.** It is all too easy to revert to the habit of using the words, *"I feel **that**…"*, and of following them with your *opinion*. If you do this you are not giving any information about your emotion, with the result that you are leaving people guessing. The trouble with giving your *opinion* is that others receive it as an invitation to argue. If you want to be taken seriously it is much more effective to give them a fact they cannot argue with – by *naming your feeling and making it clear what it is about, and why you feel it*.

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5a Saying what you *want*

Many of us learn very early in life that it is unfair, rude, and perhaps punishable to ask for what we want, because it might clash with or deprive someone else of what *they* want. This may have been part of the necessary and well-meant social training provided by our carers when we were little. But many of us have taken it to mean that it is safer to *keep quiet* about what we want, and this has become one of the underlying beliefs that have shaped our personality and relationships. In order to avoid conflict we have acquired the habit of suppressing one of the most vital and empowering questions we can ever ask: *"What do I want?"*

But that early lesson in life was wrong. Provided we also consider what *others* want, asserting what *we* want usually works very well. Saying what we want does not mean we are *insisting* on it. It simply means we are *putting it on the table for discussion*. If there is a clash of needs, we can either discuss how to divide up the limited resource, or – even better – create a way to *both* have what we want. Provided our aim is to satisfy *one-another's* needs as much as our *own* there is no conflict and the conversation can be harmonious.

This robust but harmonious way of negotiating about what we want is made possible by using empathy and assertiveness together. Of course there are some situations where it will not work because no *common goal* can be found. But wherever we share a goal we are likely to discover there is a win-win possibility. Just imagine how some of your disagreements, conflicts or difficult negotiations would go if you could approach them in this spirit. This is how you can put it:-

> *"Let's agree to be honest about what we each want. Let's also agree that no solution is acceptable to **either** of us unless it satisfies us **both**. In other words, let's agree to take care of **one-another's** interests as much as we are taking care of **our own**. If we approach it in this spirit we'll be able to satisfy us both."*

Example

Consider three very similar scenarios – similar in the sense that in each of them there is something you *want*, in each of them you need *someone else's agreement*, and in each of them you are expecting to meet *resistance*. In the chapters on persuasion and selling in Part Two of this book we will look at how to conduct a persuasive conversation, but the question we are looking at now is how to *begin* – how to *broach* the topic. Here are the three scenarios:-

- You are a salesman approaching a customer because you want to make a sale.
- You have an idea to put to your boss, and you need his agreement.
- You need to discuss with your spouse or partner the idea of relocating nearer to your new job.

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Imagine you are the customer. Which of these two openings by a sales person is more likely to win your trust?

a) *"I just happen to be in your area. I'm conducting a survey. I'm not trying to sell you anything?"*
b) *"This afternoon I would very much like to persuade you to buy our product/service. I've no wish to put you under any pressure. If in the end you remain unconvinced, that's your decision and I'll respect it. But I believe I can convince you."*

Approach A puts you on your guard by trying to use false pretences to get through the door. There are two reasons why approach B is more likely to win your trust. First, it is honest. Second, it encourages you to feel free to say no if you want to.

Provided you start in this open and frank way, and provided you then do a lot of listening with empathy, the remainder of the conversation falls naturally into place. Identify the customer's need, make your offer, explore every one of his objections and any obstacles that might be holding him back from making a decision. If, when all his objections have been dealt with, he has still not made a decision, you can lead him towards one by asking, e.g., *"What further concern needs to be addressed before you can say yes"*.

Using this approach in the conversation with your boss, you would say, *"I want to persuade you to say yes to an idea of mine. Of course the decision is yours, but I believe I can convince you, and I would like to try."*

To your spouse or partner you might say, *"Darling, I'm not comfortable with the amount of travelling I'm having to do. I want us to discuss the pros and cons of moving nearer to my new job. I realise there are lots of things for us to think about in coming to a decision."*

Guidelines

5.1 How to realise and say what you want

Deep down we probably *know* what we want. But this quiet inner clarity may be drowned out by the surface noise in our mind. Sometimes it helps to spend time stilling the mind and reflecting quietly on the question, *What is it I really want?* Our *feelings* can guide us to the answer if we allow them.

When we have re-discovered it we can say it with the quiet confidence and authority that comes from saying what we know to be true. This is about listening to our own feelings and our own inner voice. It is a central aspect of being assertive.

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5b Saying what you *don't* want – saying '*no*'

It is as crucial to know what we *don't* want – and therefore when to say *'no'* – as it is to know what we *do* want. The reason why saying *'no'* is difficult is that it admits a clash of wills and risks confrontation. When it's a relationship we *care* about the fear of conflict is always hard to handle. But if we can bring those feelings into the conversation they will help us find the courage and integrity we need for saying *'no'* – as shown in these examples:-

Example 1

15 year old son: *Dad, a friend of mine is having a party this weekend. It's all right if I go, isn't it?*

DAD (alarm bells start ringing): *Where is it?*

SON: *In his parents' house. I'll only be away one night.*

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DAD (now feels under great pressure, but decides that rather than cave in and say 'yes' it would be better to be honest; speaks **assertively**): *I'm not happy about it at all. I love you and think highly of you, but saying no to your friends when they ask you to do things that might not be good for you is very difficult even for an adult. I don't think you've had enough experience yet to stand up to that kind of pressure.*

SON: *Lots of my friends are going. **Their** parents have a more **modern** outlook.*

DAD (finds courage and integrity in his gut feelings; continues to be **assertive**): *I don't like saying no to you, but my guts are telling me it would be wrong to say yes.*

SON: *Oh, Dad! Don't be so old fashioned. It'll look really bad if I can't go.*

DAD (at last able to give a clear and firm 'no'): *You may be upset, but my answer's no, and I've told you the reason why.*

SON (secretly relieved, and feeling very safe and cared for): *Oh, all right then.*

Example 2

CLUB CAPTAIN: *Pete, there's a vacancy on the club committee. You're just the kind of person we need. I'd like you to join us.*

MEMBER (feels overwhelmed, but with *mixed* feelings): *That's very flattering, Chas. Thank you for the invitation. I need to think about it.*

CAPTAIN: *What's to think about? Just say yes.*

MEMBER (admits his feelings): *I'd like to. But it doesn't feel right. It would be one more reason not to spend time with my wife and children. I'm already away from home more than I want to be.*

CAPTAIN: *It won't take much time. We only meet once a month.*

MEMBER (finally able to be firmly assertive): *No thank you, Chas. My decision is not to take on any more commitments right now. I appreciate being asked. I'm glad to be a club member and play in the team, and I like the way you're running it.*

Example 3

ERIC: *Viv, I need these customers contacted urgently about the changes in our delivery arrangements. Could you do it for me right away?*

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VIV (**assertive** with **empathy**): *I hate saying this, Eric, because I would like to help you out and I can hear it's urgent, but the answer is no. I'm not free. I'm tied up on someone else's urgent work.*

ERIC: *But it needs to be done **now**!*

VIV (**frank** and **firm**): *I'm really sorry to disappoint you. But right now I'm committed.*

ERIC: *When can you do it, then?*

VIV: *I'll be free when I've completed the job I'm doing. It won't be till next week.*

Guidelines

5.2 How to say 'no'

- First, say something positive or appreciative about what you are being asked to do. And show empathy if you can for person who is asking you and the need that prompts them to ask.
- Next, take time to register privately how you *feel* about doing it. You might say, "*I need moment to think about it.*" or, *"I need a few days to consider it"*, or *"I need to discuss it with my family / wife / husband / partner"*.
- Say honestly how you feel and why, e.g., *"I don't feel right about saying yes, because…"*.
- Wait for their response.
- If they press you, be firmly assertive in saying no, e.g., *"My decision is no, for the reason I have said. But thank you for asking."*

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6 Conclusion of Part One and preparation for Part Two

This book is about a way of communicating that enables us to live and work together honestly, successfully and harmoniously. It has just two ingredients, empathy and assertiveness. Empathy is the art of giving *my* attention, respect and understanding to others. Assertiveness is the art of winning *theirs*. Often these are taught as two separate skills, but they obviously go together like two sides of the same coin. There are very few difficult conversations that cannot be handled successfully with this pair of skills. But the approach is radically different from the one many of us are familiar with:-

Guidelines

6.1 A radically different approach to difficult conversations

Are you aware how you approach difficult conversations? Some people do it rather like a game of chess. They try to *anticipate* what the other person might say in order to *plan ahead* how they will answer it. This can become a habit. But a combination of empathy and assertiveness offers us a radically different approach. Here are its key principles:-

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- Keep your *goal* clearly in mind, that is, what you *want* and what you *don't* want from the conversation.
- Don't try to plan ahead. Instead, keep your attention focussed on what is happening in *the present moment* – both to your *own* and to the other person's *feelings*.
- Take good care of your *own* interests, and *equal* care of the *other person's*.
- At each moment in the conversation use one of only two responses, *empathy* or *assertiveness*. As soon as you notice changes in either person's feelings put them into words, switching from assertiveness to empathy and back again as the feelings change. In this way you can move towards your goal with honesty, patience and flexibility.

The paradox in this approach is that by giving up control of the conversation, even though it might feel risky at first, you actually increase your freedom and power to influence the outcome. This approach is totally without the scheming and manipulation inherent in the *chess* approach. Conversation does not have to be a *competitive* or *adversarial* game. It can be a game played in a spirit of mutual respect, understanding and helpfulness.

But *when* is this approach useful? That is the question addressed in Part Two, which covers a wide range of difficult conversations with scripted examples and practical guidance. You can be selective in picking out the relevant conversations, because with Part One as a foundation, each chapter in Part Two stands on its own.

To select the relevant conversations you can, of course, simply scan the table of contents, but before doing so you may find it helpful to reflect privately on your own relationships. Let your mind wander rapidly – but not too rapidly – over the many people you encounter. With the help of the list below pick out and make a mental note of some of the specific relationships you would like to improve:-

intimates, relations, friends, neighbours, people you share an interest with,
people you see as enemies or rivals, people you disagree with or are in conflict with,
people at work, your seniors, your peers, your juniors, colleagues, associates, customers, suppliers,
fellow students, pupils, teachers,
acquaintances, people serving you in shops, markets, surgeries, hospitals, people you help or to whom you provide a service,
strangers you encounter as you move from one place to another.

Your feedback

We would love to know how you are getting on with the guidelines suggested in this book. Please feel free to contact us, telling us about what you have tried and with what result, where you feel good about it, and where you feel disappointed. And please let us know if there are other difficult situations you would have liked the book to touch on. You can email us at phil@gouldtraining.co.uk.

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Part Two
Difficult conversations

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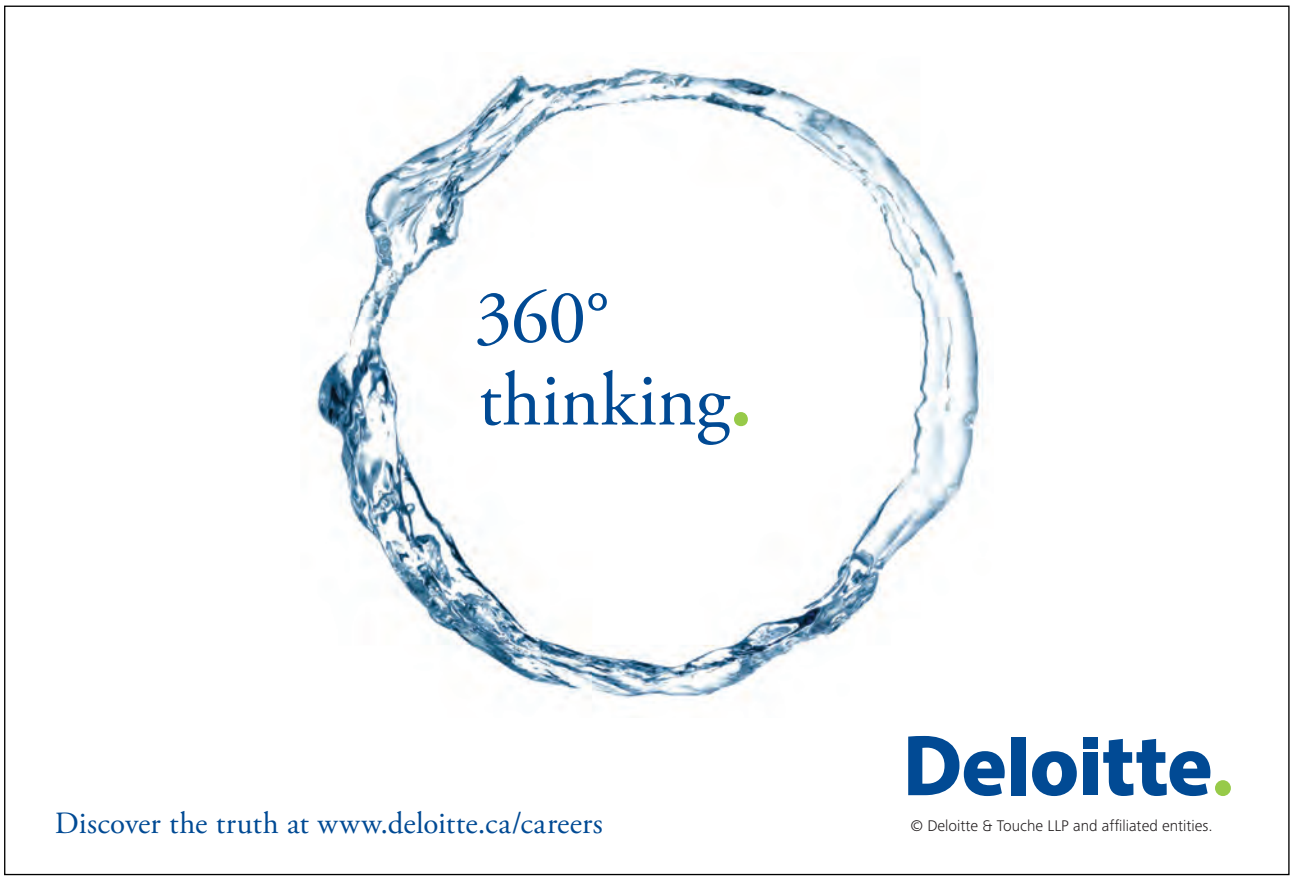
7 Giving feedback, or criticism

Most people find criticism hard to take. We all know this, and it makes us nervous about *giving* it. Many people try to avoid it altogether. Some try so hard to do it a *nice* way that the message gets watered down. Others do it in a way that makes people feel attacked. What we need is a way to be *tough on the issue yet soft on the person* – to make the criticism strong enough to be taken seriously yet without putting people on the defensive. If we do not do it *assertively* people are unlikely to take us seriously. But on the other hand, if we do it without *generosity* it is hard for them to receive it with an open mind.

Example Here is someone doing it, first, *without* much skill. Hans, a project manager, has written a report on his project for the Managing Director. He is proposing extending the scope of the project and investing more money in it. He is very enthusiastic, and for the past fortnight has spent evenings and weekends polishing up the report. This is what his boss, who has to see it before it goes to the MD, says about it:

BOSS: *It's far too long. He'll be much too busy to read it. He'll reject it out of hand."*

Even though Hans accepts there might be truth this criticism, being spoken to like this after all his hard work is hardly a good experience. Try answering the following two questions about what it feels like receiving this kind of criticism:-



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1. How approved of is his boss making him feel, on a scale from zero *(the boss thinks he is useless)* to 100 *(the boss thinks he is fantastic)*?
2. What kind of experience is it receiving this criticism, on a scale from -5 *(extremely discouraging)* to +5 *(very encouraging)*?

Obviously giving constructive criticism is not one of this particular boss's strengths. But imagine, instead, that he used a different approach, as shown below. How different would Hans's experience have been?

BOSS (starts with **praise** – saying **how he feels**, **what about** and **why**): *I'm very impressed with how thorough your report is, and with your attention to detail. It convinces me we should go ahead with your proposal.*

HANS: *That's great. Thanks. I hope the MD thinks so, too.*

BOSS (moves on to **criticism** – saying **how he feels**, **what about** and **why** – but takes it slowly): *I have a big worry about that.*

HANS: *Oh? What's the worry?*

BOSS: *It took me a long time to figure out exactly what you are proposing. The MD is very busy. I'm worried he'll get impatient and reject your proposal.*

HANS: *Oh, I see.* (thinking hard about how to solve this problem) *Of course, I've got it. It needs a clear summary to start with, doesn't it, so he doesn't need to bother with the detail unless he wants to?*

BOSS: *Great*.

Here again are the questions about what it was like receiving this criticism:-

1. What did Hans feel this time was his approval rating in his boss's eyes, on a scale from zero *(useless)* to 100 *(fantastic)*?
2. What kind of experience was it receiving this criticism on a scale from -5 *(extremely demotivating)* to +5 *(highly motivating)*?

Second time round Hans's boss followed these guidelines:-

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Guidelines

7.1 How to give feedback, or criticism

Always start with **praise**. To give praise, think of something specific that the person has said or done that you feel good about, and give 3 pieces of **specific** information about it:-

1. **The fact that you feel good**, e.g., *pleased, satisfied, impressed, full of admiration.*
2. **What you feel good about**.
3. **Why it makes you feel good**.

Then pause and pay close attention. Allow time for your praise to sink in and for the other person to respond. Do not be in a hurry to start the criticism.

Go on to the **criticism** only when you are sure he is in a receptive state of mind. To give criticism, think of one thing you feel bad about, and give 3 **specific** pieces of information:-

1. **The fact that you feel bad**, e.*g., frustrated, concerned, dissatisfied, alarmed.*
2. **What you feel bad about**.
3. **Why it makes you feel bad**.

Then pause and pay close attention. Allow time for your criticism to sink in and for the other person to respond.

When you try out this method of giving criticism, pay close attention to how the other person is receiving it. Make your praise so specific, honest and generous that he feels genuinely approved of, and do your utmost to make the whole experience highly motivating for him. Most people are amazed at how well this method works when they put it to the test. But don't be hard on yourself. Practise in easy situations before moving on to difficult ones.

7.2 Frequently asked questions about praise and criticism

But surely, if I follow praise with criticism won't I end up being negative – and isn't that wrong?

The key is – be generous. If you do a generous enough job with the praise, the criticism will also be received as positive. It will not be necessary to follow it with praise.

Is it really necessary always to start with praise?

Yes, it's a pretty good rule of thumb. Otherwise your criticism, however kindly meant and well done, is likely to put them on the defensive, and then it is much harder to get through to them.

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How do I know when I have given enough praise?

The answer is, when they feel genuinely approved of. So be generous. Don't stop at one piece of praise when you can find two. Don't stop at two when you can find three. *Convince* them you are *genuinely* in their fan club. The result is electric. Imagine how it would feel if someone treated *you* like this.

What if I cannot think of anything to praise them for?

Only when you *suspend* critical thoughts can you see the other person in a more generous light. How can you do this? By making a conscious effort to separate their perceived weaknesses from their strengths, and by *setting aside* their perceived weaknesses in order to focus your mind on their strengths.

What if I resent them too much to think generously about them?

You cannot think generously while carrying a grudge. Grudges, or grievances, weigh heavily on us. But no one can *make us* carry them. We are free to let them go if we want to.

Am I not in danger of being patronising when I give praise?

Yes you probably will sound patronising unless you (a) make the praise very *specific*, and (b) *say only what you sincerely mean*. If you do these two things there is *no* danger of being patronising.

Why is the PAUSE so necessary when using this method?

It gives time for your words to sink in, and for the other person to respond. Most people are in a rush. Don't be. This way of communicating works better slowly.

Must I always follow praise with criticism?

No, of course not. It works better if you give more praise than criticism. It also works well to praise often with no criticism attached – people will then be less suspicious of your praise.

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8 Customer support – responding to calls for technical help

It is often very disturbing to a customer when something goes wrong, or *seems* to go wrong, with a product or service he depends on. Behind many calls for technical support there are strong feelings – anxiety, frustration, anger, disappointment, panic. And until the customer has expressed his feelings and let off steam it is very hard for him to calm down and think rationally. Just because they are so eager to get stuck in and fix the problem, customer support people often make two mistakes:-

- They expect the customer to engage in a rational conversation *before* letting off steam.
- They take it for granted that he knows they intend to stay with him, get to the bottom of his problem and help him resolve it. Of course that *is* their intention, but in his highly charged emotional state he probably doesn't assume it.

Both these mistakes are shown in the example below. Nicola is the customer support person:-

Example

NICOLA: *How can I help?*

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CUSTOMER: *It's your ***** software. It keeps letting me down. I can't rely on it.*

NICOLA: *What exactly is the problem?*

CUSTOMER: *How do I know what the ***** problem is? I shouldn't have wasted my money on it. It's useless! What am I supposed to do now?*

NICOLA: *Please calm down and tell me exactly what the difficulty is.*

CUSTOMER: *Don't tell me to calm down! This is a crisis! My business depends on it – worst luck!*

NICOLA: *But if you don't tell me what's going wrong how can I help?*

CUSTOMER: *You don't seem to realise how serious this is! If you call this 'customer support' you must be joking!*

NICOLA: *I'm not going to take any more insults. Do you want me to help or don't you?*

CUSTOMER: *How can I trust you to help me if you don't realise how serious this is?* (He may not actually **say** this, but it probably **is** how he is feeling.)

There is obviously a serious misunderstanding here. The customer urgently *needs* help, and Nicola is eager to *give* it. The reason why they totally fail to connect is that Nicola is not talking about either her own or the customer's *feelings*.

But the ball is in her court. Below is the conversation again. This time she is much more communicative, and uses both *empathy* and *assertiveness*:-

NICOLA: *It's Nicola here. I'm on the customer support team. How can I help?*

CUSTOMER: *Hi. It's your ***** software. It keeps letting me down. I can't rely on it.*

NICOLA (**empathy**): *From your tone of voice this sounds like a bit of a crisis.*

CUSTOMER (lets off steam): *Yes, it is! My business depends on it. It's costing me time and money.*

NICOLA (**more empathy**, plus **clear reassurance**): *I can hear it's urgent. My job now is to identify and fix the problem to your satisfaction.*

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CUSTOMER (lets off more steam and calms down): *That's a relief.*

NICOLA (takes charge, but with empathy): *First I am going to have to ask you some detailed questions to identify precisely what the problem is. Are you ready for us to do that?*

CUSTOMER (now feels sufficiently safe and calm to take part in a rational conversation): *Please go ahead.*

This time nothing is taken for granted. Everything is communicated. The customer rapidly calms down and is able to take part in a rational conversation. He feels understood and reassured – and this does not take long. Because of how the problem is handled his confidence in the supplier is restored. Two things make all the difference. One is Nicola's quick *empathy*. The other is the reassurance she gives him that she intends to stay with him until the problem is fixed.

Don't argue. Don't ride roughshod over people's feelings. Don't rush them. Don't expect them to be reasonable before they've had a chance to let off steam. Don't assume they know your whole purpose and intention is to give them the support they urgently need – spell it out.

Here is a simple framework:-

Guidelines

8.1 How to handle calls for technical support

First, calm the customer down by listening with *empathy* and allowing him to let off steam.

Then *be assertive* in stating firmly and clearly:-

1. How you feel about it (e.g., you regret it has happened, you're keen to do something about it).
2. What you are going to do about it (e.g., ask him for more facts, go and talk to X, ring him back within Y amount of time).

Then do what you have said you will do.

Finally check that he is fully satisfied.

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9 Persuasion without argument

In persuasion you are trying to influence people's thinking and win their agreement. The trouble is they *resist*, and so persuasion is mainly about overcoming resistance. But resistance is driven by emotion. When people's negative feelings are aroused it is hard for them to be open-minded, and when presented with facts and logic they can do little but argue. That is why reasoned argument so often fails to persuade.

Before looking at a specific example, let us examine the process of persuasion. Here is an outline of a conversation. Person A needs something from Person B. B is resisting. Below is the conversation in outline. It shows what happens when A tries to persuade with reasoned argument. The two minds are drifting apart, losing connection and A fails to persuade:-

A: *I want you to…*

B: *I can't because…*

A: ***Yes, but…***

B: ***I know but…***

A: ***Yes but …***

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B (digs his heals in and remains un-persuaded)

A (not getting anywhere; gives up)

Notice the *"yes buts"*. Listen in to almost any meeting or discussion where controversial issues are being discussed, and you will hear people saying *"yes but" to* one-another (or similar words). It is an *argument*. As they argue their frustration rises and they end up in a *'dialogue of the deaf'*. This approach to persuasion rarely succeeds.

Below, in contrast, A responds to B's resistance with empathy and assertiveness:-

A (listens with empathy instead of saying 'yes but'): ***Your concern is***…

B: *Exactly!*

A (speaks assertively): ***My*** *worry is*…

B: *Mmm. I see what you mean.*

This is much more persuasive. And it *avoids argument* – it is *argument* that raises the temperature and wastes so much time. Of course there may still be work to do before B fully agrees, but A has greatly increased the likelihood of success. He has dealt with B's resistance by allowing him to let off steam and calm down. This has created a rational atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding.

If you find yourself arguing, stop. You can turn it into a much more fruitful discussion by using this combination of empathy and assertiveness.

Example 1 – how *not* to do it. Here is Nicola again, a member of the customer support team. This time she is dealing with Hugo, manager of the software development department, in order to get the technical assistance her customer urgently needs:-

NICOLA: *Hi, Hugo. I've got a customer with a software problem. We need to get it fixed as soon as possible.*

HUGO: *I'm afraid he'll just have to wait.*

NICOLA: *But he says he* ***can't*** *wait.*

HUGO: *I dare say. But I've no programmers free right now.*

NICOLA: *Can't you release someone? Its urgent.*

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HUGO: *Sorry. Every customer says his need is urgent.*

NICOLA: *Yes, but how am I supposed to keep the customer happy if I can't get him the service he needs when he needs it?*

HUGO: *I don't know. My people can't be everywhere at once. They're fully stretched.*

NICOLA: *Maybe, but what am I going to tell the customer…he's not going to like it!*

HUGO: *You're not the only one with pressures!*

Both Nicola and Hugo are doing the best they can, and with the best of intentions. But an unresolved stalemate like this does not bode well for the business. Let us see what difference it makes when Nicola uses a combination of empathy and assertiveness:-

NICOLA (**assertive** with **empathy**): *Hi, Hugo. I need to talk to you. I'm bringing you another headache.*

HUGO (enjoys her frankness): *So what's new? Come in, Nicola. What can I do for you?*

NICOLA (**assertive**): *My worry is that one of our major customers has a problem with the software. And things are going to get very difficult if we delay fixing it.*

HUGO (feels he, too, can be frank): *Hmm. The trouble is, half my programmers are already tied up with customers, and the other half are committed to new software development.*

NICOLA (**empathy**): *I can see it's a very difficult balance you have to strike.*

HUGO (her empathy wins his trust): *Yes it is.*

NICOLA (more **empathy**): *And now I'm adding to the pressure.*

HUGO (now, in response to the empathy he has received, **he** starts to soften and see things from **her** point of view): *Well, yes…but that's what you're paid to do.*

NICOLA (**assertive**): *What alarms me is that this customer carries a lot of weight in the business community. It could damage our reputation, and that would be hard for us to recover from.*

HUGO (she has almost brought him round; he puts up token resistance): *They **all** say it's urgent. You don't think he's just trying it on?*

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NICOLA (**firm** and **assertive**): *It's losing him revenue as we speak. I'm worried it will hurt **us** in the long run if we delay.*

HUGO: *Okay, you've got yourself a programmer.*

NICOLA: *I appreciate it, Hugo. I'll keep you in the picture about the customer's feedback when the job is done.*

In the guidelines below, the process of persuasion is broken down into two stages, the first is working towards *mutual understanding*, and the second is working towards *agreement*. It often works better to keep them separate – delay trying to get agreement until you have achieved mutual understanding:-

Guidelines

9.1 How to persuade without argument

Stage one – towards mutual understanding

1. Begin assertively by telling the truth about what you want, e.g., *"I want to persuade you to change your mind about…"*. Pause, expecting, allowing and encouraging him to put up resistance and raise objections.
2. Listen with empathy until he is satisfied you have understood his concern and are taking it seriously. Be patient, allowing him to say all he wants to say.

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3. Be assertive again, honestly telling the truth about your concern about the risk of not doing what you want. Use pauses so that what you say can sink in.

Stage two – towards agreement

Finally, having achieved mutual understanding, summarise both concerns, and ask him to join you in looking for an agreement that satisfies you both.

Throughout the conversation be alert for changes in his state of mind. Be flexible. Respond to his changing state of mind by switching as needed from empathy to assertiveness and back again. Don't be in a hurry to reach agreement. Impatience to reach agreement is one of the biggest obstacles to persuasion. *Agreement* is for stage two – it cannot be achieved before *mutual understanding*.

Example 2 Raj is a systems quality assurance adviser. Mel is an IT manager:-

Stage one – towards mutual understanding

RAJ (says what he **wants**): *I want us to do a 'walk-through' of the system with the user before we start to build it so that we can double check it delivers exactly what he wants.*

MEL: *Sorry, the system has to be out by April 5. We've got to start building it right away.*

RAJ (**empathy**): *You're afraid that if we spend time checking the design we won't be able to complete on time.*

MEL: *Yes.*

RAJ (more **empathy**): *You're obviously under a lot of pressure from the user.*

MEL: *You can say that again! He's chasing me like mad. We'll just have to go ahead and keep our fingers crossed.*

RAJ (yet more **empathy**): *I get the impression you're not against quality assurance in principle. The problem is keeping the user happy.*

MEL (lets off steam): *Exactly!*

RAJ (senses Mel is now ready to listen; **speaks assertively**): *My concern is the risk you'll be running if we don't check the design thoroughly with the user before building it. The cost of putting a bad system right can many times the cost of getting it right in the first place.*

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MEL: *I take your point. But what can I do?*

Stage two – towards agreement

RAJ (summarises both sides, and proposes working together towards a win-win solution): *There are two issues – keeping the goodwill of the user, and making sure the system is right first time. They both matter to us both. If we put our heads together I feel sure we can work out a way to achieve both. How about it?*

MEL: *I don't see how it can be done, but I suppose there's no harm trying.*

RAJ (**empathy**): *You sound reluctant.*

MEL (coming round fast): *No, not really. It's obviously a good idea. Let's do it.*

9.2 Frequently asked questions about persuasion

How do I know when I'm encountering resistance?

If resistance is not obvious from the other person's words and non-verbal signals, there is another reliable way of detecting it. It always disturbs you when someone resists you. You become tense. So your own feelings will tell you, if you tune in to them. If you go on trying to reason with someone when they are resisting, you are wasting your time because their receiver is switched *off*. It is more effective to switch to empathy the *instant* you encounter resistance.

Surely people are responsible for their own state of mind. Why should I have to work so hard when it is *they* who are being irrational?

Most of us become irrational when something is bothering us. It's normal. The issue is purely practical – do you need someone's cooperation or not? If you do, you are much more likely to get it if you listen with empathy when they are resisting.

I don't have time for this. Isn't it quicker just to present the facts and the logic?

Without these skills it takes much longer to win people round, because so much time is wasted in fruitless argument. The slow, reflective pace of this method is deceptive. In practice it usually works surprisingly fast. There is no quicker way of winning people round.

If I show empathy for my opponent am I not, in effect, agreeing with him? And will he not then take advantage of me?

No, it doesn't work like that. Understanding is quite different from agreement. A display of understanding for *their* view increases their respect for *yours*. They will see your empathy as strength, not weakness. If you are sceptical about this, the only way you will be convinced is by having a go.

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I am uncomfortable with silent pauses. Are they really necessary?

Yes, they are. They give *weight* to your words. They give the other person *time to think*. They enable you to *observe* their reaction. They enable you to make a much better connection. It is very worthwhile getting used to them.

Doesn't it save time to combine empathy and assertiveness in the same sentence?

Keeping them separate is much more effective. Combining them in the same sentence is too much information for the other person to process – it will break the connection. Yes, combine them in the same *conversation*, but not in the same *sentence*, because they each need to be followed by a pause while you wait for a response – and then *respond* to the response. The paradox in this approach is that it works faster if you slow down and exercise more patience.

How do you know when to use empathy and when to use assertiveness?

If common sense does not tell you which to use first, you can start with *either*. If one doesn't work, switch to the other, and then switch back again as the conversation flows back and forth.

Isn't this approach rather manipulative?

With this approach you are being honest as well as understanding and considerate. The word "manipulative" suggests you are trying to get people to do something against their own interests, or to force or trick them. Genuine empathy has no manipulative or hidden agenda at all. It invites them to give voice to their own interests and takes them seriously when they do.

What if someone interrupts me with an objection while I'm putting my case?

What is the point of putting your case to someone who is not listening? A good rule of thumb is, *"be interruptable – even in mid-sentence"*. You need to stop speaking *the instant* you notice they have switched off, and to set aside (temporarily) what *you* were going to say so that you can focus of your full attention on *them*. This is a good way to get them listening again.

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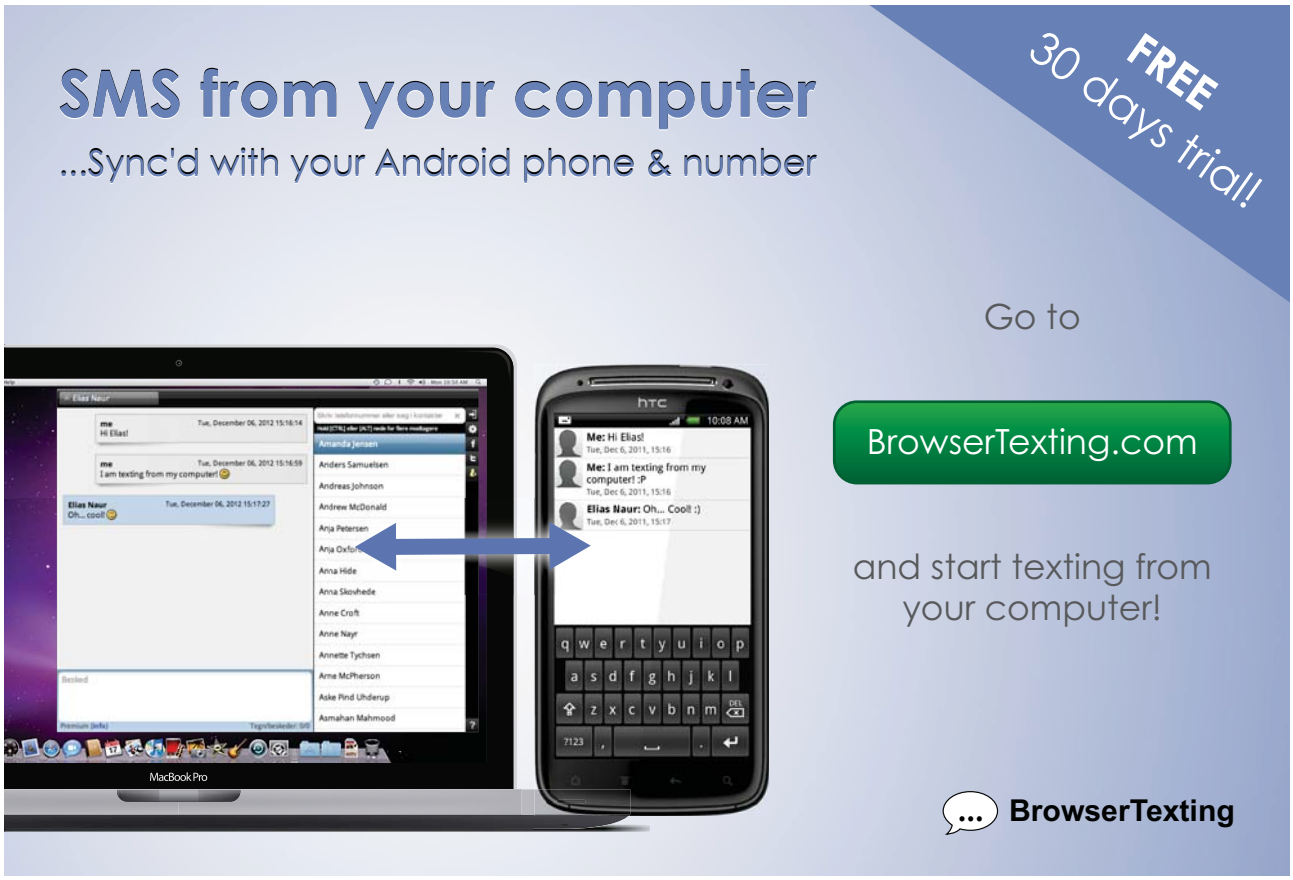
10 Handling resistance in a meeting

The reason why people resist change is usually because they are afraid of losing something they value. It makes no difference whether their fears are real or only imagined, because either way, while they are being driven by *fear* their minds are closed to *reason*. But how can resistance be handled in a room full of people each with a different concern? We cannot empathise with them all at once. How can we encourage them to express their concerns and yet prevent the meeting from turning into chaos? This needs both a firm hand and a clear structure.

Here is a structure for running such a meeting. It will enable you not only to listen with empathy to each person who has a concern, but also to keep firm control. It's also good fun running a meeting this way, not only for you but also for the other members of the meeting:-



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Guidelines

10.1 How to handle resistance in a meeting

You can introduce the meeting along the lines below (adapting the words as needed):-

"Thank you for attending this meeting. My purpose is to tell you (or consult you, or help you decide) about X. This is an emotive/controversial subject. I'm sure you will have questions and concerns about it, and I want to hear them all. So this is how I'm going to run the meeting:-

Instead of waiting until I've finished talking, I want you to interrupt me whenever you have a question or a concern. Yes, it's quite okay for you to interrupt me. Instead of trying to answer you right away, I will first check that I understand your point and then I'll put in on the flip chart, where it will stay until you're satisfied it's been answered. The flip chart will be our agenda for this meeting.

Now, before I tell you about X, let's start building the agenda in the flip chart with your immediate questions and concerns. Who would like to start?…

Is that all for the time being? Now I'll talk, but remember, please don't sit nursing a question or a concern. Call it out. Interrupt me as soon as it comes into your mind."

The crucial skill you need for running this meeting is *empathy* in response to each of their comments, questions and concerns. It is difficult to avoid being drawn into trying to give answers, particularly when what they say sounds negative – as in the example below:-

Example – Responding to a negative question or comment

Imagine you are introducing a change in working methods to your team. You have just given your little introductory speech along the lines suggested above, and now you are inviting them to call out their questions or concerns. Imagine one of them says:-

"*Whose stupid idea is it to make this change, anyway?"*

The person who asked this question obviously feels bad. But instead of being *aware* of it and *admitting* it, his feelings erupt in the form of an aggressive question. He sounds very negative, and your heart sinks because he is threatening to create a bad atmosphere in the meeting. But actually, even though he sometimes expresses himself negatively, he is a highly motivated member of the team. Behind his aggressive question is a genuine concern. Here are some of the possible responses you might make. Which do you prefer?

A: *Please try to be more positive. That kind of negative comment won't get us anywhere.*

B: *Why do you feel so bad about the change?*

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C: *You obviously feel bad about the change. I imagine it's because you need to be convinced there's a good reason for it before agreeing go along with it.*

Response **A** makes him feel badly misunderstood and put down – an insult he will need time to recover from. The others learn from this that they had better keep quiet or they may get similar treatment. The atmosphere in the meeting goes downhill fast. Everyone feels bad. The mood of the meeting goes against you and against the change you need them to agree to. Response **B** is better because it accepts his aggression without judgement and encourages him to say more about what is bothering him. It is therefore more encouraging to the rest of the group.

But it is **response C** that reaches out to him in a generous and energetic way and makes him feel respected and understood. It creates a very good atmosphere in the group. This is how the conversation is likely to proceed:-

HE: *Whose stupid idea is it to make this change, anyway?*

YOU (**empathy**): *You obviously feel bad about the change. I imagine it's because you need to be convinced there's a good reason for it before agreeing to it.*

HE (surprised at being handled so positively and calmly): *We've had a lot of change lately. It makes it very hard to keep our standards up.*

YOU (more **empathy**): *And that's why you don't want to do it unless you're convinced there's a real need for it.*

HE (lets off steam): *Exactly!* (Your empathy has won his trust, as well as the trust of all the others.)

YOU: *Thank you. I hope by the end of this meeting you **will** be convinced.* (You write, "*Why is it necessary?*" on the flip chart with his initials beside it.) *This won't be crossed off until you're convinced…. Who's next?*

The others now feel encouraged to speak up frankly about *their* concerns. The atmosphere in the meeting rapidly improves. Everyone feels good. Their mood is now *for* you and *for* the change you want them to agree to. Their confidence in you has been given an enormous boost. Below are some guidelines about crucial *dos* and *don'ts* when running this meeting:-

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Guidelines

10.2 Crucial dos and don'ts when running a persuasive meeting

Do listen with empathy to every single question or comment, in order to try to find the concern behind it. Keep reflecting back until each person speaking feels understood.

Do write it on the flip chart, as near as possible in the words of the person raising it, before listening to the next concern or question. The flip chart is the meeting's agenda.

Do have faith that behind any negative, hostile or confused question or comment is a genuine concern that deserves your respect and understanding. If you can keep this up people will be very impressed and you will have a very positive effect on the meeting.

Do be assertive in keeping a firm hand on the meeting. Stick strictly to your plan.

Don't be drawn into trying to answer a question or concern while you are drawing up the agenda of concerns, no matter how tempting. It will undermine your control.

Don't take part in or allow any discussion until all questions and concerns have been captured. This, too, will undermine the meeting plan.

Don't cross any item off the agenda until it has been dealt with to the satisfaction of the person who raised it. This will make people feel *safe* a give them a *sense of control*.

10.3 A few other practical points

Use of flip chart Do write fast and legibly. Don't translate into your own words – use theirs if you can. Beside each item write the person's initials. When the list of concerns is complete you can number them in the order in which you would like to deal with them.

Give them time to collect their thoughts People's minds sometimes go blank when asked to contribute at a meeting. They may need time to collect their thoughts. A good way to make sure they do not forget something important is to give them a few silent minutes near the start of the meeting to make a private note of their thoughts, questions or concerns.

Clarify at the outset the purpose of the meeting

Make sure right at the start that both you and they are clear and in agreement about who has what say in the decision. Are you *informing* them about a change that has already been decided, or *consulting* them before the decision, or *helping them decide* for themselves? Any uncertainty or disagreement about this question will create confusion and tension in the meeting.

This method of running the meeting takes a bit of practice, but most people who use it find it very productive and extremely enjoyable. Good luck with it. It is a very useful tool for managing change.

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11 Handling objections when selling

What do empathy and assertiveness bring to selling? The answer is that they make possible an approach that is radically different from the way some sales people try to do it. Such sayings as, *"He's a great salesman – he could sell refrigerators to Eskimos"*, implies that selling is about manipulating or confusing people into buying what they neither need nor want. But selling is, or can be, a genuine, honest and open-minded exploration between a potential buyer and a potential supplier of whether there is an outcome in the interests of both.

One of the main differences is in the handling of *objections*. Sales people are sometimes taught how to *answer* objections, or how to *pre-empt* them, or how to *distract* customers from raising them by manipulating them into saying yes. The underlying belief is, *"It's what you **tell** people that persuades them"*. But we are saying, *"The main thing that opens people's minds is how you **listen** to them"*.

Objections do not have to be seen as negative things, regrettable obstacles in the path of making a sale, to be made little of, or got round, or even if possible avoided altogether. They can be seen as valuable markers on the royal road to a sale, to be encouraged, valued and brought out into the open. How can an objection be a valuable marker on the road to a sale? Here is an example:-

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Example

CUSTOMER (raises a serious objection): *You let us down badly with late deliveries last month.*

SALESMAN (instead of arguing or trying to make excuses, takes it on the chin, and listens with **empathy**): *Yes we **did** let you down. I imagine you have lost confidence in us and feel you need to look for another supplier.*

CUSTOMER: *I'm afraid that's true.*

SALESMAN (more **empathy**): *So to win back your business I will obviously have to make you confident it won't happen again. You'll need to be convinced we've taken the problem seriously, have found the cause, and have a reliable solution.*

CUSTOMER (his mind begins to open): *That would certainly help.*

SALESMAN (speaks frankly, but takes nothing for granted): *I believe I can convince you.*

CUSTOMER: *Okay, go ahead. We would rather stick with who we know, provided we can trust them. But you'll have to be very convincing.*

SALESMAN (continues being frank and open): *I believe you. I'll do my best.*

The salesman now gives his presentation. As he does so he pays very close attention to the customer to see how he is reacting. At the slightest sign of a frown or a raised eyebrow, or even a blank expression, he reflects, e.g., *"I can see I haven't fully convinced you", "Something's still worrying you", "You're still concerned about…", "You're not happy with what I'm telling you".* He does his best to address each concern to the customer's satisfaction.

He ends up with, *"Are you convinced enough to place another order with us?"* If so, job done. If not, he goes round the cycle again, asking, *"What further obstacle needs to be overcome before you are sufficiently convinced to place an order with us?"* Once more he does his best to satisfy the customer's concern, and then tries again to close the sale.

Here are the guidelines for applying empathy and assertiveness to selling. They are, not surprisingly, similar to persuading without argument, because of course selling is just a form of persuasion:-

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Guidelines

11.1 How to handle objections

Open by speaking honestly and assertively about what you want from the meeting or conversation, in other words, your purpose, and how you intend to run the conversation, e.g., *"My purpose is to persuade you to buy our product/service. I can't do that unless I understand your needs and concerns. So as well as **me** telling **you** things, I need **you** to tell **me** things. Of course, the decision is yours, but I believe I may be able to convince you, and I would like to try."*

Then be ready to listen with empathy. Having started the conversation in such an honest way, provided you listen with empathy the remainder of the conversation falls naturally into place. Identify the customer's need, make your offer, and explore all obstacles that might be holding him back from making a decision. If, when all his objections have been dealt with, he has still not made a decision, you can lead him towards one by asking, *"What further obstacle needs to be overcome before you can say yes?"*

Respond to every objection or sign of resistance with intelligent empathy, in order to tune in to the concern behind it.

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12 Handling complaints

Behind every complaint there are strong feelings – anxiety, frustration, anger, disappointment, panic. It is bound to be very disturbing when someone you rely on for goods or services lets you down – or *seems* to let you down. Until you have let off steam it is very hard to think rationally. A mistake customer care people sometimes make is expecting the customer to be able to think rationally before letting off steam. Here is a simple, reliable method for handling customers' complaints:-

Example

CUSTOMER (fuming): *I've a good mind to write to the Consumer's Association about this ****** hotel!*

HOTEL MGR (**empathy**): *Something has obviously annoyed you, sir.*

CUSTOMER: (letting off steam) *Too ****** right! When I booked I was promised a quiet room. I don't call being on the first floor over the car park quiet!*

HOTEL MGR (firm and clear): *I do apologise. I'll see right away what I can do to get you moved.* (Sorts out the room change) *Is there anything else I can do to make you happy?*

CUSTOMER (much calmer, with his confidence in the hotel restored): *No, that's fine. Thank you.*

Guidelines

12.1 How to handle complaints

First, calm them down by listening with empathy and allowing them to let off steam.

Then be assertive in stating firmly and clearly:-

1. How you feel about it (e.g., you regret it has happened, you're keen to do something about it).
2. What you are going to do about it (e.g., ask them for more facts, go and talk to X, ring them back within Y amount of time).

Then do what you have said you will do.

Finally check that they are fully satisfied.

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Don't argue. Don't ride roughshod over people's feelings. Don't rush them. Don't expect them to be reasonable before they've had a chance to let off steam.

It is extraordinary how quickly people calm down when you respond to them with empathy. It makes them feel understood and reassured they are being taken seriously. Because of how this problem is being handled their confidence in you, the supplier, is restored. In fact they probably now have more confidence in you than before things went wrong. Looked at in *this* way customer complaints are very valuable opportunities.

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13 Receiving criticism without being defensive

Most people experience criticism as a personal attack even when it is not *meant* that way, and have a strong instinct to defend themselves. Of all the situations in this book, this is the hardest to handle gracefully. But reacting in a defensive way to criticism always raises the tension, because it fails to take the criticiser's underlying concern seriously, and therefore makes him feel even worse about you. It therefore diminishes you in his eyes. An *un-defensive* response, on the other hand, has the opposite effect. It increases your stature in his eyes and enhances the relationship. And far from showing submission, it actually shows strength.

Another thing to bear in mind is that much of the criticism you receive is *false*. The reason why is given below. An understanding of this can help you stand firm and not submit to it. What you need is a way of being *firm* yet *un-defensive* in the face of false criticism. This might sound like a lot to ask for, but, as we shall see shortly, a combination of empathy and assertiveness places it within your grasp.

Of course some of the criticism you receive probably *is* true, and you need a graceful way of responding to this, too. You also need to be able to tell the difference between true and false criticism.

Example 1

Imagine someone senior in the hierarchy says to you, *"Judging by the performance of your team it's obvious you are completely lacking in leadership ability"*.

Which of us, on receiving this, would not experience a rapid increase in blood pressure? Not only is it a heavy blow to our self-esteem, but it also threatens our reputation and career prospects.

But hold on. If instead of panicking we examine it closely we can see in it a number of very interesting things:-

- It is so sweeping and unhelpful a generalisation that it is meaningless.
- Because it is so unhelpful and so general, it is the kind of thing no confident leader would say.
- On the other hand it is precisely the kind of thing that *would* be said by someone who secretly feared that he *himself* was lacking in leadership ability.

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- So why does he say it? The answer is that by pointing an accusing finger at someone *else* he can get relief from the self-critical voice inside his own head. This process is well known, and we all do it – it is called projection, or scapegoating. We see in others the very qualities we are trying to deny in ourselves. We attack *them* because at some level we feel this absolves us from an attack we secretly fear *we* deserve. Most of the time we are not aware we are doing this. But even though – or perhaps just because – it goes on beneath the surface of the conscious mind the impulse to do it is very strong.
- Therefore destructive personal criticism usually says more about the person giving it than about the person receiving it.
- But if such criticism so clearly deserves to be dismissed as false, why are we so easily hooked and disturbed by it? The reason is that we too have an inner critic. The criticism we hear from others seems to confirm the truth of our own worst fears and *self*-criticisms. Of course, it is all highly irrational and really deserves only our laughter, but we take it seriously and feel drawn to it as to a magnet. This is one of the universal frailties of human nature.

But although seeing negative personal criticism for what it really is can help us be less disturbed by it, we still need to respond in an effective way. So let us return to the example and see how we might respond with a combination of empathy and assertiveness:-

SENIOR PERSON: *Judging by the performance of your team it's obvious you are completely lacking in leadership ability*.

YOU (**empathy**): *You seem to feel very bad about my team's poor performance. I imagine that's because it could reflect badly on the department as a whole.*

SENIOR PERSON (spontaneously lets off steam, calms down a bit and feels a little less vitriolic): *Exactly!*

YOU (**assertive** – telling the truth about how you feel and the reason why): *I feel undermined when you say I'm completely lacking in leadership ability. Of course I've a lot to learn, but I too feel bad about my team's performance, and I'm trying hard to improve it.*

SENIOR PERSON (taken aback by your frankness he backs down; his respect for you rapidly increases because it is obvious to him that no-one who was totally lacking in leadership ability would be able to stand up for themselves in the way you are now demonstrating): *Okay, sorry, perhaps I misunderstood.*

YOU (continuing to speak the simple truth): *If you have a specific criticism of how I am managing my team I will be grateful for it because I am very keen to improve.*

SENIOR PERSON (may be unable to respond to this because he may not have anything specific to say; if he does you can only gain by it):…

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Your integrity is intact. You have stood up for yourself under severe attack with both courtesy and grace. You have acquitted yourself well and have gone up in his estimation. What has enabled you to do this is a combination of empathy and assertiveness. Your empathy opened his mind. Your honest assertiveness brought him to his senses.

But what if the criticism you receive is valid? Of course, if it is skilfully given it will not be so difficult to receive, but if it is given insensitively or aggressively you may still have a problem receiving it without becoming defensive, as in the example below:-

Example 2

Do you remember Hans, the project manager in chapter 7 who received abrupt criticism from his boss for writing a report with a lot of detail but no summary? Let us see how he might have handled the negative criticism in a positive way:-

BOSS: *This report is far too long. The MD will be much too busy to read it. He'll reject it out of hand.*

HANS (reeling from the unexpected negativity): *That hurts! I've been working on this round the clock!*

BOSS: *What counts around here is how **smart** you work.*

HANS: *I accept what you are saying. I want to improve the report. Are you saying it's total rubbish? If not, can you give me a clue what's wrong with it.*

BOSS: *There's nothing wrong with the detail. He just won't have time to read it, so it's a waste of time.*

HANS: *Oh* (thinking hard). *I've got it. I'll write a clear summary at the beginning. Do you think that will make a difference?*

BOSS: *Yes.*

HANS: *I should have realised. Thanks for pointing this out. I'll do it right away.*

Guidelines

13.1 How to receive criticism without being defensive

Always respond to criticism with empathy, e.g., *"You obviously feel very bad about… I get the impression the reason is…"* Be as specific as you can, as illustrated in the example above.

Always say honestly how you feel at receiving the criticism, why you feel that way, and what you want to do about it, again, as illustrated in the example above.

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14 Criticising someone's idea constructively

When someone gives birth to an idea they are naturally attached to it. It is their 'baby'. When they feel it is being attacked they react as though they themselves are being attacked. So if you need to challenge them you had better do it in a supportive way. Otherwise not only will you find yourself in bitter argument, but also you will fail to influence them.

The trouble is, if you point out the weakness of an idea but say nothing of its strengths you give the impression you cannot think of anything *good* to say about it. You probably do not *mean* to imply it is useless. It's just that because you are worried about one of its weaknesses, *that's* what you want to talk about. But the person hearing you inevitably draws the wrong conclusion. All he hears is your disapproval, and feeling disapproved of is one of those bad feelings that close people's minds.

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The remedy is simple and obvious – and not difficult – though it *does* require some effort. If you want an open-minded response when challenging someone's idea you had better start by showing your appreciation – and the appreciation had better not be half-hearted. Then, instead of reacting defensively to what sounds like an attack, he will feel genuinely approved of and be able to hear your concern with an open mind.

Example

A marketing manager is talking to his colleague, the sales manager, about a new piece of work his department has produced. What we are looking at here is how the *sales manager* handles the conversation:-

MKTG MGR: *You'll be pleased to hear we've completed the new product brief. We're very proud of it. It's based on months of careful research and answers all of the questions and objections customers are raising. Once the sales force is trained to use it the way it's been designed to be used we calculate it will significantly improve our sales figures. We're ready to start the training now.*

SALES MGR: *I'm totally against forcing all the sales people into a one-size-fits-all straightjacket. It de-skills them – ruins them as salesmen.*

Imagine you are the marketing manager. What effect has the sales manager's response had on you? Your blood pressure has probably gone through the roof and you feel ready to fight to the death to protect your 'baby'. What do you imagine the sales manager thinks of your work, on a scale from Zero *(totally useless)* to 100 *(incredibly valuable)*? You probably imagine he thinks it is pretty useless, and *that* of course greatly diminishes your respect for *him* and his ideas. So you dismiss what he says with contempt:

MKTG: *I see. You say this after we've spent hundreds of thousands developing the best product brief we've ever had. The trouble with you sales people is you're totally stick-in-the-mud!*

SALES: *The trouble with you marketing people is you live in cloud cuckoo land!*

Not, perhaps, the most successful approach! They end in bitter deadlock. But let us see how the sales manager might have achieved a better result with the approach below. Even though he (the sales manager) is being quite tough the marketing manager remains open to persuasion because he never feels attacked:-

SALES (**starts with convincing praise**): *I've studied the brief carefully and I'm very impressed with the work that's gone into it. I particularly like the thorough way you've analysed and answered all customers' questions and concerns. I believe the sales force will find this extremely helpful.*

MKTG (surprised, pleased but a little sceptical): *Are you sure you're feeling okay? I've never heard you be so complimentary before!*

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SALES: *I mean it, though.*

MKTG (his doubt about the sales manager's sincerity set at rest): *Thanks.*

SALES (**assertive**): *I do have a major worry.*

MKTG: *Which is?*

SALES: *If you put it over to the sales force as a rigid one-size-fits-all straightjacket they will be de-skilled and demotivated by it. The problem is the way it tries to take control of the sales interview.*

MKTG: *Yes, but surely if they follow the method we suggest they'll get far better results.*

SALES (**uses the assertive ratchet** – see chapter 4): *Now I'm even more worried because you're not taking me seriously. We've had this problem before. I don't want to lose any more of my best sales people.*

MKTG: *What are you suggesting, then?*

SALES: *A more flexible approach to the sales interview itself, allowing the salesman more room for skill and discretion.*

MKTG: *Okay. Could you spare some time to help us modify that section of the brief?*

SALES: *I'd be glad to.*

This is obviously a much more successful approach. Here are the guidelines:-

Guidelines

14.1 How to criticise someone's idea

Always start with *generous praise*. There are two ways of doing this – either or both can be used:-

1. Say specifically what you like about the idea and why you like it.
2. Show with empathy your understanding of the thinking, feelings and intention behind it.

Then speak assertively about your concern. Say specifically what you *don't* like about his idea and why you don't like it.

Don't forget to *pause* for his response, after both the praise and the criticism.

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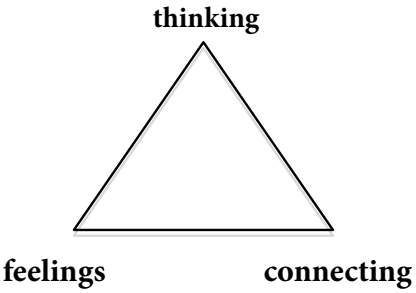
15 Handling conflict

When a relationship is going well it *feels* good, we *connect* well with one-another, and we *think* well together about the goals and problems we have in common. These are three key aspects of all relationships: the way we **feel**, the way we **think,** and the way we **connect**. A change in any one of them always affects the other two, as indicated by the diagram:-



Conflict is very easy to get into and very hard to get out of. In order to see what steps we need to take to get *out* of it let us look at what happens at each point of the triangle:-

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Feelings We have a mixture of emotions: fear, vulnerability, anger, resentment, hatred and contempt. We also feel misunderstood, attacked, judged and guilty. The brain is flooded with chemicals putting us in a state of high alert. In this state it is no use being told to '*calm down*'; we can't – not just like that.

Thinking Our thinking becomes defensive. We forget the goals we have in common. We get stuck in entrenched, embattled positions. Our minds play irrational tricks on us. Our perception of our opponents is distorted. We see them as an enemy attacking us, and we endow them with an enemy's worst characteristics. The gulf between us seems to widen to the point where it becomes unbridgeable. It is not possible in this frame of mind to come together for rational thinking and problem solving.

Connecting We cannot listen with empathy to one-another, and the way we speak to one-another becomes openly or secretly hostile. We misunderstand and are misunderstood by one-another. We would rather have nothing to do with one-another because it is so stressful.

What steps can we take to reverse this vicious spiral?

The damage can be so severe that it cannot be repaired quickly. Reversing the vicious spiral has to be a patient, step-by-step process. Before people can come together for rational thinking, the other two points of the triangle need repair. Peace talks attempted before this has been done can only fail because there is too much resentment and misunderstanding and too little trust.

It can be helpful to use a referee or facilitator trusted by both sides, and the following suggestions are written for use by the referee or facilitator. They can also be used *without* a third party, but it is not easy because emotions are often running so high:-

Guidelines

15.1 How to handle conflict

Step 1

- Meet with each of the parties in the conflict separately. Explain (or read aloud) the points on the previous page about what happens to relationships in conflict.
- Establish an agreement that the conflict is preventing them from achieving their common goal, and they want to find another way. Without this agreement there is no point in going any further.

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Step 2

- The first point of the triangle to repair must be **feelings**, because until they have let off steam and calmed down, nothing constructive can happen. At this stage *safety* is paramount. The safest way is to meet each side *separately*. Listen to them with empathy. Encourage them to express all their most negative feelings as strongly as they can – not, of course, to their opponents but to *you*. Do not judge them. Be supportive. Help them become honestly aware of the extent of their own irrationality. Continue until you sense a softening of mood.
- Discuss step three with them, so that they understand it and are ready to take part.

Step 3

- Bring them together for the first time in order to repair their **connection**. The purpose is limited. It is **not** to reach agreement and resolve the conflict – they are not ready for this yet. It is to **make one-another feel more understood**, by showing empathy and being assertive instead of aggressive.
- Get them to take turns listening with empathy to one-another, trying to understand what really matters to one-another. Continue until you sense some melting of attitudes. Prevent them from trying to solve any major problems at this stage.

Step 4

- Now, if all has gone well, they are ready to negotiate an agreement and resolve the conflict. The ground rule for the negotiation is: *Let's agree to be honest about what we each want, on condition that we can also agree that no solution is acceptable to either of us unless it satisfies both. In other words, let's agree to take care of one-another's interests as much as we are taking care of our own. Let's approach it in this spirit and see if we can find a solution that satisfies us both.*
- Your role as referee is to blow the whistle whenever the negotiation reverts to conflict. If it does, go back to step 3.

If you prefer to tackle the conflict without the help of a referee, it would be a good idea to separate for Step 2. You will each need to find a friend who is prepared to sit with you while you get your strongest negative feelings safely off your chests.

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16 Negotiating for a win-win agreement

What do empathy and assertiveness bring to the art of negotiation? They make possible a win-win instead of a win-lose outcome, provided you can (a) agree on a common objective, and (b) agree not to accept any outcome that fails to satisfy *both* sides.

These two conditions are no small matter, because we often start negotiating not with a shared aim, nor with the intention to take care if *one-another's* interests as well as *our own*, but with the aim of maximising our *own* advantage. The idea of being equally concerned about the satisfaction of *both* sides does not occur to us. But it makes a big difference not only to the outcome but also to the spirit in which the negotiation is conducted. *Without* it we inevitably see and treat one-another as enemies, with fear of being taken advantage of as the underlying motive. But *with* it, feeling safe we will *not* be taken advantage of, we can treat one-another as friends, and that opens up a wider range of possible outcomes. Here is the spirit of it:-

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> *Instead of trying to gain an advantage over one-another let's try another way. Let's agree at the outset not to accept any outcome unless it satisfies us both. In other words, let's agree to take care of one-another's interests as much as our own. Then we can feel safe enough to look for a solution that satisfies us both.*

Below is a suggested procedure for having this conversation:-

Guidelines

16.1 How to negotiate a win-win agreement

Step 1

It is crucial to agree (a) a common objective and (b) not to accept any outcome unless it satisfies *both* sides. Without this agreement you cannot achieve a win-win outcome. But if this proves difficult why not explore the fears that are preventing the other side from agreeing to these conditions?

Step 2

Say, *"You go first. Please say honestly what you need out of this negotiation, and why you need it. My purpose to start with is simply to satisfy you that I fully understand what you need and why you need it"*. Take enough time to achieve this purpose. Don't argue – just listen with empathy in order to make them feel understood and respected.

Step 3

Say, *"Now it's my turn. I am not asking you to agree with me – just to satisfy me that you hear and understand what I need and why I need it"*. Say frankly what *you* need and why you need it. Be specific and clear about where the outcome *they* need satisfies you and where it does not. Remind them if necessary that you are not asking them to agree, just to hear and understand. Do not move on to step 4 until you both feel fully understood.

Step 4

Say, *"It is clear that we have some common ground, but also that there is a gap to be bridged before we can agree. Let's now proceed on a quid-pro-quo basis in order to see whether we can close the gap. In other words, I'll concede you this, if you'll concede me that. Let's both take care that neither of us feels we are being taken advantage of."*

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17 Motivating people

Could this be true for you? You get extremely frustrated when someone who has undertaken to get things done simply does not get them done. You have to chivvy them again and again. And because you have no other way you sometimes get angry and shout. You feel bad about this and wish there *was* another way to get results with less noise and friction.

Yes, there *is* another much quieter and more effective way using assertiveness and empathy. We call it *obstacle analysis*.

The obstacle analysis method of motivating people

When you are driving down the road and encounter an obstacle you do not try to ram your way through. You get out, examine the obstacle, and then remove it or find a way round it.

If people are failing to do what is expected of them, shouting at them and putting them under pressure is likely to be as successful as trying to force the car through an obstacle in the road. It is far more effective, intelligent, elegant, quicker and causes less friction simply to switch into *obstacle analysis* mode:-

Guidelines

17.1 How to get someone to do what they have said they will do – by Obstacle Analysis

So what might the obstacle be? It is very easy to make wrong assumptions. It is likely, when people fail to do what you are expecting of them, that you have been making wrong assumptions in one of more of the following areas:-

1. Are they clear exactly what is expected of them, why it is necessary, and that they have been given the authority or discretion they need? Confusion or misunderstanding about this question is one of the commonest reasons why things do not get done.
2. Do they know *how* to do it? Perhaps *not*, and if not they need to be shown how. Again, this is a very common obstacle.
3. Are they unwilling for some reason you have not yet understood because you have not yet listened well enough?
4. Is someone or something they have no control over preventing them? If so, perhaps they need your help to remove the obstacle.

The beauty of obstacle analysis is that most obstacles once they have been clearly identified are easy to remove. The hardest part of it is not *dealing* with the obstacle, but *identifying* it. Assertiveness and empathy are the skills you need for identifying and removing the obstacles.

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18 Giving very bad news in a humane way

When we have to give very bad news the emotions can be overwhelming, both for the giver and the receiver. Empathy and assertiveness, though they do not make it *easy*, at least make it a little *easier*. Our *empathy* helps the receiver of the bad news cope with the inevitable rush of emotion. Our *assertiveness* – that is, our honesty in admitting our *own* discomfort as bearer of the bad news – can both give us the strength to proceed with this very difficult task, and also save us from giving the impression we don't care.

Example 1

YOU (**firm** but with **empathy**): *Come in and sit down, Dave. I've something to tell you that is bound to come as a shock.*

DAVE: Sits down and waits.

YOU (**assertive** with **empathy**): *I hate having to tell you this, but we've decided to make you redundant. It's absolutely no fault of your own.*

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DAVE: *Why, then?*

YOU: *Unfortunately the business is struggling and we have to cut costs.*

DAVE: *But why me?*

YOU (**empathy** with **assertiveness**): *I've been totally satisfied with your work and I'll regret losing you. It's purely that we can't afford any longer to keep you on.*

DAVE: *Can I persuade you to change your mind?*

YOU (**firm** and **assertive**): *I'm afraid not. It's been a painful decision made only after a great deal of thought. I wish it could be otherwise.*

DAVE: *Oh.*

YOU (**empathy**): *It's obviously a shock.*

DAVE: *Yes.*

YOU (**empathy** with **assertiveness**): *There are probably questions you need to ask about your redundancy money and period of notice, etc. We can discuss it now, or if you'd prefer you can take time to recover from the shock and collect your thoughts and questions – and we can carry on later with this conversation. I'll be as helpful as I can.*

DAVE: *I feel in a bit of a daze. There's a lot to think about. I'd rather collect my thoughts and come back later.*

(Note: This example is about how to handle the *emotion* in a very difficult conversation. You may need to check on your own country's legal requirements about hiring and firing people before engaging in this conversation.)

Example 2

YOU: *Dave, come in and sit down. There is something I need to say to you.* (Pause. Go slowly. Give him plenty of time to digest and respond to everything you say. Continue when he is ready.) *What I have to tell you may come as a shock. It's not about your work. I'm always very pleased with the way you do your job, and I'm glad to have you in the team.*

DAVE (though slightly reassured, he is alarmed and braces himself for a shock): *What is it then?*

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YOU: *You may not be aware, but you have a strong body odour? It's very noticeable to people in the office. I feel extremely uncomfortable having to mention something so personal, and this conversation must be even more difficult for* ***you****. I mean you no disrespect.*

Pause, observe and listen, giving him time and allowing him to react, let off steam, and think.

(Note: A very small minority have a medical condition producing an unpleasant body odour that people find disturbing. While the problem may need to be discussed, it is as well to discuss it with care.)

Guidelines

18.1 How to give very bad news

- First, briefly warn them to prepare themselves for a shock.
- Then briefly admit how uncomfortable you feel having to give the bad news.
- Give the bad news undiluted, brief and straight.
- Wait for their response. Pay careful attention and have your empathy and assertiveness ready for when needed.

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19 Getting a busy person's attention

When people are busy it can be difficult for them to switch from what they are doing and pay attention to *you*. Here are two approaches, the first *without,* and the second *with* empathy and assertiveness:-

First approach

YOU: *Excuse me, could I see you for a minute? It's urgent.*

BUSY PERSON: *I'm rather busy right now. Can't it wait?*

YOU: *Afraid not. Sorry.*

BUSY PERSON: *Well, all right. But be quick. I must get on with this report.*

Yes, he has agreed – but reluctantly, and you therefore have only half his attention. The other half is still on the report he is writing. He is on the defensive, protecting his time from your intrusion. That is because you appear to be aware only of your *own* needs. You showed no awareness of or concern for *his* needs, you gave him no time to let off steam and mentally adjust, and you lied about how much of his time you needed.

Second approach

YOU (**empathy**): *I can see you're busy. I don't imagine you want an interruption.*

BUSY PERSON (lets off steam): *True! I've got this report to get out. I'm up against a deadline. What is it?*

YOU (**assertive**): *I need to talk – urgently.*

BUSY PERSON: *I see. How long will it take?*

YOU (clear and definite): *Ten minutes.*

BUSY PERSON: *Okay. Just let me finish this sentence, and I'll be with you.*

Now, when he is ready, you are much more likely to have his full attention.

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Guidelines

19.1 How to get a busy person's attention

Always start with empathy, e.g., *"I can see you're busy. I don't expect you want an interruption."* Wait for him to let off steam.

Then be clear and assertive, e.g., *"I need to see you, urgently. It'll take…minutes."* Wait for him to register your need and give you his attention.

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20 Repairing relationships

We hope this book has unlocked a treasure chest for you by offering a way of turning potential misunderstandings and conflicts into fruitful and harmonious relationships. Nothing can be more rewarding. But it's not easy, is it? The principles and skills we are teaching may be easy to understand, but it takes a considerable amount of practice before they are firmly enough embedded to be reliable. And there are obstacles in the way – mental habits that can be hard to let go of – especially when you are under pressure.

If you have identified some relationships you would like to improve, here are a few practical suggestions about how you might use the skills and insights in this book to create a better connection:-

Guidelines

20.1 Repairing relationships

1. Assume that at least some of the assumptions you have been making about the other person are wrong. Look at them with fresh interest. Why not discuss this openly with them? You could say, *"I realise I have been taking you for granted and making assumptions about you… I'm sorry for misunderstanding you. From now on I will pay you more attention and try to understand what really matters to you."*
2. When you feel someone is making the wrong assumptions about *you*, do not let it pass. Be frank with them. You could say, *"You seem to be assuming…about me. This makes me feel misunderstood, because it's not how I really feel or who I really am at all. I want you to know that what really matters to me is…"*
3. If you want to create rapport, do not always rely on chatting about impersonal things like the weather or the football match or where you go for holidays. Be interest in *them*. Try to discover what *really matters* to them – *now*. Rapport is not agreeing with them. It is making them feel *known*, *accepted* and *understood*, so that they feel comfortable and safe to be themselves with you. Most people love to talk about themselves to someone they feel sees them and accepts them as they are.
4. Become more aware of the way you take part in conversations. Instead of your usual responses, take your opportunities to listen with empathy and speak assertively as they arise. It will have an immediate effect on the quality of your conversations and relationships. You can experiment whenever you want to and have the energy to do it. There is nothing to lose and a great deal to gain.

If you need further help to enhance your skills, you could consider attending our Skills with People course. It is a combination of individual coaching on the phone and a three-day training session in a small group, spread over 6 months. For details, see the website, www.gouldtraining.co.uk.

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21 List of practical guidelines included in the book

The book includes a number of what we have called, *__guidelines__*. These are step-by-step instructions or suggestions on **how to** apply particular skills or handle particular conversations. From the list below you can refer back to any particular set of guidelines:-

Listening with empathy
Using open questions
Coaching
Speaking assertively
Making a complaint
Using the assertive ratchet
Getting people's attention in a meeting
Saying what you want
Saying 'no'
A radically different approach to difficult conversations
Giving feedback, or criticism
Handling calls for technical support
Persuading without argument
Handling resistance at a meeting
Crucial dos and don'ts when running a persuasive meeting
Handling objections
Handling complaints
Receiving criticism
Criticising an idea
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Negotiating a win-win agreement
Obstacle analysis – getting people to do what they have said they will do
Giving very bad news
Getting a busy person's attention
Repairing relationships

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Feedback

We would love to know how you are getting on with these guidelines. Please contact us at phil@gouldtraining.co.uk describing what you have tried and with what result, where you feel good about it, and where you are disappointed with the result. And please let us know if there are other difficult situations you would have liked the book to cover.

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22 Reading

This is not a *'recommended reading list'*, because it is impossible to know what will be an enjoyable and worthwhile read even to people one knows well. It is simply a few of the writers who have touched *me* on the subject of this book:-

- E.M. Forster, whose novels, written a century ago, express again and again a profound experience of what it means both to *'connect'* and *not* to 'connect'.
- *On Becoming a Person*, by Carl Rogers, a psychologist who pioneered a new approach to psychotherapy. You may not be interested in the subject of psychotherapy in itself, but much of what he said is relevant to all human relationships. I find his thinking and writing honest, clear and compelling.
- *Getting to Yes, negotiating an agreement without giving in*, by Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton, of the Harvard Negotiation Project, internationally renowned experts. A helpful and practical approach to the handling of conflict, persuasion and negotiation.
- *The Power of a Positive No,* another very helpful book by William Ury, bringing home how essential it is to know what we *don't* want as well as what we *do* – and to have the integrity to stand firm and *say* it.
- *How to Make Friends and Influence People*, by Dale Carnegie. Full of good sense and practical emotional intelligence – although written long before that term became fashionable.
- *The Power of Now*, by Eckhart Tolle. This book is inspirational and helpful in a deeper kind of way, and like all such material one has to be ready for it – only then does it speak.
- *Nonviolent Communication – a Language of Life*, by Marshall Rosenberg. I was astonished when a friend recently lent me this book, to discover how similar its approach is to our own. The author acknowledges, as we do, his debt to Carl Rogers. John Gray, author of *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus*, writes, *"Marshall Rosenberg's dynamic communication techniques transform potential conflicts into peaceful dialogues. You'll learn simple tools to defuse arguments and create compassionate connections with your family, friends, and other acquaintances."*

But book suggestions can be two-way. We would find it valuable to know which books *you* have particularly enjoyed or found helpful in this field. Please let us know.